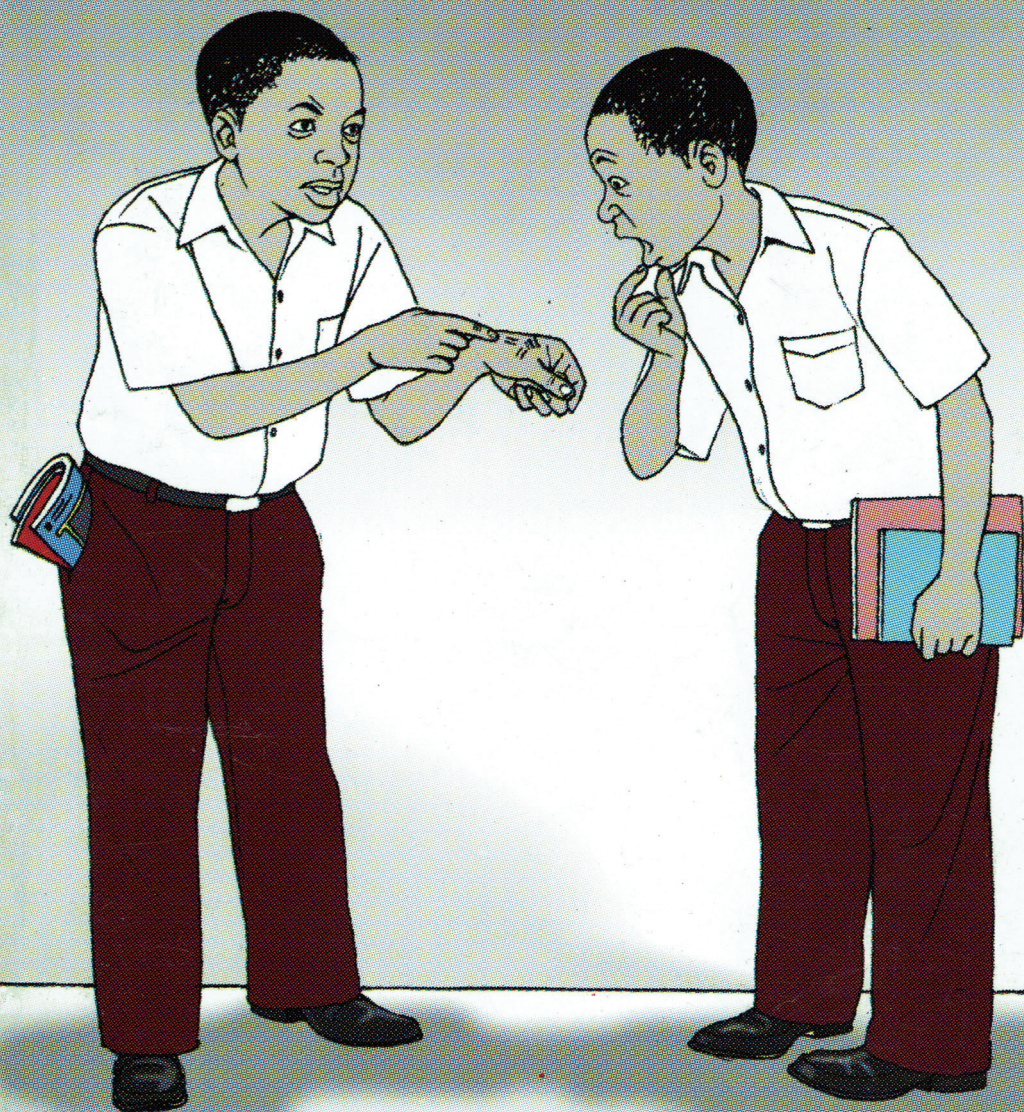


The Luck Charm



Tito Banda

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The Luck Charm

Tito Banda

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This book is dedicated to my wife, Hleziye, and our children: Mwiza, Ndawona, Chimango and Thumbiko.

It is also dedicated to the men and women of my village, my area and beyond – some of whom are now departed – who have been remembered in these pages in one way or another. This novel is a monument of my deep gratitude to them all: They helped make the childhood and adolescent stages of my life enjoyable, meaningful and memorable.

This is a novel, a work of fiction. The characters and incidents in these pages are imaginary. William Koyi Secondary School is also imaginary – at least it did not exist when this novel first came out. However, everything else that is said here in connection with the man William Koyi is a matter of historical fact.

CHAPTER ONE

It was an October evening and the men of Musa village were having their after-supper chat at their usual place of fellowship – the *mphala*. It had been an ample supper, as was always the case in every village throughout Chitheba area during the first few months after the harvest. Each family's full granary seemed to encourage the housewife not only to send *sima* to the *mphala* every evening, but also to try to impress the men by making sure that her lump was bigger than any other woman's.

Their stomachs still full, the men and one boy were sitting rather uncomfortably around a crackling fire, some of them leaning lazily against the dry leaves of the *mphala*'s low wind-break of intertwined twigs adjoining the cattle kraal. Their chit-chat covered a variety of topics, each topic leading into a new one without the men being aware of the change. Everything around this island of light in the moonless night was peaceful. Even the cattle were calm in their kraal as they quietly chewed the cud, occasionally letting out heavy burps from their loaded stomachs. It was

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a still night, and overhead, the deep cloudless sky was ablaze with gleaming stars.

Suddenly, it seemed one of the stars had become detached from the sky and was falling. As it plunged through the night sky above Sinda mountain to the west of the village, it glowed with more and more brilliance until it became a blazing ball that left a shining tail behind it. The ball of light got smaller as it descended, till it vanished just above Nduruwe caves, a cluster of boulders near the summit of Sinda mountain. The tail hovered over the caves for several moments before it too vanished, just after a bird had let out a loud, drawn-out shriek in Nkhulande hill, right behind the village.

"*Pthu! Kafwe wekha!*" the dazed men severally spat and cried out in the direction of the brief spectacle after it was all over, telling it "May you yourself die, not us!" And the ritual of spitting and hurling the curse at the evil apparition was also performed by a group of children telling folktales on the veranda of one of the houses, for they too had seen the awesome sight in all its terrible brilliance.

"Mtochi's *wwira* is still alive after all," a voice hissed with disgust more than it trembled with fear. It was the voice of old Panji Manda, the village's headman, who was sitting just outside the ring of light cast by the log fire. "The wizard's deadly pet has returned to finish us. And by shrieking right in our backyard it is telling us that this village will be its primary target this time."

Old Panji had put into words the fear of all the men at the *mphala*. Every one of them still remembered Mtochi,

the old toothless widower who used to live alone on his mixed-crop field just below Nduruwe caves until his death ten years earlier at the hands (or rather the jaws) of hyenas. Originally of Zamangwe village a few kilometres to the north of Musa village, Mtochi had decided to live in self-imposed exile in the hills following the death of his wife, an event which he took as the last straw. His enemies in Zamangwe village, so he believed, had killed all his six children, bewitching each of them before they had the chance to reach the age of five. And now they had robbed him of his wife. Obviously they did not want him in that village. And so, a few months after the death of his wife, just before that year's harvest, he built a house beside the shack in which he and his late wife used to stay every growing season in order to guard their maize, millet and groundnuts against monkeys that abounded in Sinda mountain.

One morning, not many years after the death of Mtochi's wife, the people of Chitheba area received startling news. Mtochi had gone to Malende, the home area of his late wife, to see his in-laws. Only two days after his departure an emissary came to Zamangwe village with the report that Mtochi's body had been found in a creek near his late wife's village, half-eaten by hyenas. Believing all hyenas to be pets of wizards, the people of Chitheba were astonished at the manner of Mtochi's death. Nevertheless, they were glad that the area was rid of the ill-reputed man. And as year after year went by without even the death of a baby, it was

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assumed, with much relief, that Mtochi's *mwira* – the terrible double-headed, death-breathing snake – had followed its master to Malende and had also died there.

Thus old Panji's views on that evening's apparition inevitably led the men into a discussion dominated by fearful predictions of impending evil.

There was one person in the group, however, who did not share such fears – Tomasi Manda, the only boy in the gathering. Although just thirteen years of age and with only eight years of schooling – he had just written the Primary School Leaving Examinations and was waiting for the results – Tomasi was something of a book worm. He now remembered reading about falling stars not too long ago, and was so amused by the panic among the men that he couldn't help chuckling to himself where he was sitting in the shadows of his uncles Julizga and Gwaza.

"And what is so funny about this, child?" Julizga asked when he happened to catch one of Tomasi's suppressed chuckles. Not believing he had heard a chuckle behind him, Julizga had turned around to make certain, thereby exposing the boy to the firelight.

"What are you laughing at, boy?" old Panji took up the chiding, much shocked to see Tomasi, who was sitting directly opposite him across the circle of light, cupping his mouth with his hands in an effort to control his laughter. "Is this a laughing matter?"

"That is not what you think," Tomasi said pointing in the direction of Nduruwe caves, scarcely uneasy that the men's

hostile attention was focussed on him. "That is only a star that has fallen from the sky."

Old Panji produced a brief laugh of disapproval. "What is this? Would a star fall in that fashion – with a head and a flaming tail?"

"A meteor," Tomasi said, enthusiastic in his belief that sharing with the men his knowledge of these natural marvels of the night sky would dispel their unfounded fears. "That is what books call a meteor. The falling star makes a bright light because it burns as it rushes through the air at great speed. It burns out before reaching the earth."

Someone spat in disgust as he rose to his feet, saying "*Maloza agbo* – there's an omen for you: A mere suckling would tell grown-ups there's no *vwira*." The man then merged with the surrounding darkness to answer a call of nature.

That man who momentarily left the group around the fire was Mzguli Beza. A distant cousin of the Mandas, he was not indigenous to Chitheba area, though he had come to settle in Musa village long before Tomasi was born. He did not have a good reputation in the area, being widely believed to be a wizard.

Mzguli returned from his toilet errand only to find that an argument had developed between the elders and Tomasi on the issue of witchcraft. As he resumed his seat beside Tomasi's elder brother Jalani, Mzguli could hardly believe what the boy was saying:

"It is not true that there are wizards prowling about in the night," Tomasi was saying in response to an observation made by one of the men.

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“What?” Mzguli plunged into the improbable debate. “There are no wizards? What makes you so sure, child? Have you walked around at night to prove that there are no wizards?”

“And you? Have you walked around at night to prove that there are wizards?”

This retort, uttered matter-of-factly, earned Tomasi an immediate, sharply worded rebuke from his elder bother Jalani. But that did not prevent an outburst from Mzguli:

“What cheek! Who can believe that a mere babe, still smelling of breast milk, would answer back to adults as though they were his age-mates? Where else, except in this village, do puny babies argue with grown-ups on matters they know nothing about? What is it that makes you so impertinent, boy?” Then he wagged a finger towards Tomasi and said: “Mark my words, impudent child: *uti ukawone!*”

These concluding words of Mzguli’s outburst imposed a momentary but pregnant hush on the group. For to wag a menacing finger at someone and tell him “*Uti ukawone* (literally ‘you shall see it’) was a very grave matter: It was a grim promise to the one being addressed that sooner or later the speaker would bewitch him or have him bewitched.

“What is it that you have said, Mzguli?” old Panji asked in a reprimanding tone of voice.

“Nothing really, Manda,” Mzguli said apologetically, realising that the old man was referring to the threatening remark. “I did not intend to make a threat; it is just that I

spoke in anger. I only wanted to tell the child that if he continues to talk to elders insolently he will soon get into trouble.”

But the *uti ukawone* remark was one to be explained away once uttered. Certainly, Mzguli’s explanation, given the man’s dubious reputation, impressed none of the men. As for Tomas, he, of course, thought nothing of the remark, having never taken seriously the allegation that the man was a wizard.

CHAPTER TWO

Although the *mphala* chit-chat had drifted to another topic, the effect of Mzguli's *uti ukawone* remark was still noticeable among the men when Tomasi decided to go back to the village compound. And now, seated at the crude table in his sleeping hut, he tried to concentrate on reading a novel in the smoky light of the Vaseline-jar *koloboyi* lamp. But his mind kept wandering back to the argument he had just had with the men of the village.

He looked from the novel he was trying to read and gazed at his bookshelf – a crudely fashioned wooden box nailed to the hut's mud wall about a metre above the table. Most of the books there were without spines and covers. It was a tattered, smoke-scented collection consisting mainly of ancient copies of *Reader's Digest* magazine and thick-paged hardcover novels. Nearly all of these books had been brought by Tomasi's late father from South Africa, where he had worked as a migrant labourer many years before Tomasi was born.

Tomasi would always wonder why his father and other men in Chitheba area had been in the habit of bringing home from South Africa all sorts of books – English books which they could not even read. Whatever their reasons, he would forever be grateful to those of them who gave him some of their books. He felt particularly indebted to one Khumalo, who, when Tomasi called on him one afternoon several years ago to borrow some of his books, was so impressed by the youngster's love of books that he gave him three novels and a thick English dictionary.

Although Tomasi had started to indiscriminately browse through the books in his father's house as early as when he was in Standard 4 it was not until he was in Standard 6 that he began to take a keen interest in the collection. And this was largely because this was the year Khumalo had so generously given him the dictionary. That year he asked his father to allow him to take the books from his parents' house, where they were being kept in a metal trunk, and to stack them in a bookcase in his hut. His father gave consent, and since then Tomasi spent hours, both during the day and in the evenings, laboriously reading books which were far too difficult for him at that stage. But with the help of the dictionary, which he consulted almost every minute, he managed to grasp the meanings of many of the passages he read.

As he now looked at his tattered library, wondering in which of his smoke-browned copies of *Readers' Digest* he had read about meteors, his mind once again went back to the argument he had had with the elders. His only regret

about that argument was that he now doubted if the *mphala* chats he had always enjoyed would ever be the same again for him.

Of the three boys in the village, Tomasi, being older than his cousins Kondwani and Chiza, had the right to stay at the *mphala* after supper for as long as he wished. Also, unlike his cousins, he ate from the same bowl of *sima* with the men, while the two younger boys always squatted around their own dish in one corner of the *mphala*. And Kondwani and Chiza were supposed to leave the company of the grown-ups and return to the village compound as soon as it was clear no more bowls of *sima* would be coming to the *mphala*.

Tomasi indeed cherished the privilege of sitting with the men during their nightly *mphala* chats. He enjoyed listening to them as they talked of things past, things present and things yet to come. But that evening he had hardly been paying attention to the conversation before the appearance of the meteor. For some reason, he had been pre-occupied with thoughts of the awaited primary school leaving examination results and the future of his education. His mind slipped back to those thoughts now as he sat at his reading table, the novel lying open but still unread before him.

What if he didn't get selected for secondary school? How terribly disappointing that would be – especially to Nyalupeska, his mother! His teachers at Chitheba Primary School had firmly assured her that Tomasi was bound for secondary education that year. On the basis of such assurance she had already prepared his school fees. She had

gone into risky debts to raise the money, which was now kept safe in a small tin hidden away in the family's metal trunk. To each of the three people who had lent her part of the money she had promised to pay back when she sold the family bull to one of the cattle dealers who regularly passed through Chitheba. It was a wonder that the creditors had even listened to such a promise, considering the family's poor luck with livestock: The bull was the last of the many head of cattle Nyalupeska's family had once boasted. The *malowolo* of his five daughters had made Kajanike, Nyalupeska's late husband, so wealthy cattle-wise that the number of his animals had been second only to that of his father, old Panji. But just before Kajanike's death three years earlier something strange had begun to happen to his livestock: One after another the beasts would suddenly begin to foam at the mouth and then drop dead. It was now commonly said in Chitheba that Nyalupeska's family did not have 'the head' for cattle rearing; and everyone was certain that before long the bull would also go. Thus in braving such odds to raise his school fees his mother had shown that she very much yearned that he should go to secondary school. And Tomasi simply could not imagine letting her down by not being selected.

Thinking thus about his mother once again brought back to Tomasi's mind the *mphala* argument. For he was certain Jalani, his elder brother, would that very evening report about it to Nyalupeska. And Tomasi knew what to expect from the two of them the next day.

CHAPTER THREE

Although the second oldest woman in the village – only her mother-in-law Gogo Chemeni, old Panji’s younger wife, was older – Tomasi’s mother, Nyalupeska, looked much younger than she actually was. At an age when the heads of all her age-mates in Chitheba looked as if they had been sprinkled with the flour of malted millet, Nyalupeska’s grey hairs were so few one could actually count them. She was a short, intensely energetic woman, with limbs unusually firm-fleshed for someone her age. Her mouth had not even begun to sag at the corners, and the rest of her face scarcely looked like that of a woman who had had eight children and more than a dozen grandchildren.

Nyalupeska had been fortunate to lose only one child of her six daughters and two sons. Her six-born, a girl named Rute, had tragically died at the ripe age of twelve. But Nyalupeska had been more than consoled by the arrival of her last-born, Tomasi, who would always remind her of her late husband Kajanike, who had died three years before the

beginning of this story after being mauled by a leopard: Tall, light-complexioned and big-boned but with a high-pitched, almost feminine voice, and with a head that nearly looked like a brick, Tomasi was almost an exact copy of late Kajanike.

Tomasi was special to Nyalupeska in one other respect: He was likely to be the first of her children to go to secondary school, according to assurances by his teachers. And that would be something to be proud of: Her other six living children had not gone very far with their education. Jalani, her first-born, was virtually illiterate, having had only two years of schooling. Her first three daughters had got married before completing their Standard 6. And although both her last two daughters had gone as far as Standard 8, they had failed to qualify for secondary education. They had both chosen to get married rather than repeat the class after their first attempt of the Primary School Leaving Examinations.

But Nyalupeska did not mind that Jalani had no schooling to speak of. In fact, she was inclined to think it was all to the good: Who could tell what effect learning might have had on Jalani? Education had been known to give wings to people's sons, enabling them to fly away from their villages, never to return. Had that happened to her first-born son, what could she have done the last three years since the death of her husband?

Jalani's *odi!* – to announce his arrival at Nyalupeska's kitchen hut, where she was sitting alone by a fire – gave her a start. Since the appearance of the meteor hardly an hour

earlier she had remained tense and somewhat suspicious of the darkness outside. The night being unseasonably chilly, she had been sitting with her legs flung freely on either side of the fire flickering in low flames between the three stones of her hearth. And so, before inviting her son in, she quickly tucked her legs together and slid off the goatskin on which she had been sitting. She took the skin and, stretching her hand without getting up, placed it by the door, traditionally the only place a grown-up son may sit in his mother's house. Then she shifted to a respectable distance from where Jalani would sit.

"A terrifying night," she said to Jalani after he had sat on the goatskin. "We will hear. Truly, Manda, we will hear something." Her voice was full of foreboding.

"It is very likely, mother, that before we hear of the *mwira's* first victim, something will happen to us," Jalani said. His voice was so indifferent, and thereby so inappropriate to the mood of the moment, that Nyalupeska became a little confused. "And when I say 'to us' I mean to this house, mother."

"E!E!E!" Nyalupeska exclaimed in a deep, terror-filled whisper. "What are you saying, Manda? To this house? Manda, what is it that you are saying?" Her eyes were fixed on her son's dimly lit face as she anxiously waited for him to explain himself.

"Mother, I fear for your son," Jalani said. The indifference completely gone from it, his voice was now serious and ominous.

"Tomasi?" Nyalupeska asked in a whisper that told more of despondency than of fear. She had now shifted her eyes from Jalani and, her head between her hands, was staring blankly into the smouldering fire. What evil threatened her last-born? What perils was Tomasi in danger of just when the thoughts of everyone in the family were centred on the likelihood of him going to secondary school? A dozen fears raced through her mind, each of them much heightened by the fact that this was the night of the *wmira*.

"This time, mother, your son's books have taken him a bit too far," Jalani said. His voice, which was still ominous, now had an added touch of bleak sarcasm. "He has openly ridiculed all the men of this village for believing in the *wmira*. When the dreadful *nyanga* appeared, he actually laughed at our fears. Then, as if addressing a group of children, he went on to speak a lot of dangerous nonsense, telling us that what had appeared was not at all a *wmira*, but a star which had fallen from the sky and had burnt out before it could reach the ground. I expected him to say his burnt-out star had turned into that creature which produced that loud, fearsome shriek in Nkhulande. But no, he had an equally mad explanation for that one: He said the shriek had been made by a bird which had mistaken the bright light of the so-called star for daybreak."

"But how could you let the child say such dangerous things, Manda?" Nyalupeska asked with anxiety, her eyes once again on Jalani's faintly lit face. "Huh? How could you? Why did you not slap him to shut him up?"

“Actually, mother, I was about to do just that when Mzguli said something that pulled all the strength from my body...” Jalani paused and leaned towards his mother, who was now almost petrified. Then, in a tone still foreboding but now without any sarcasm, he whispered: “Mother, Mzguli pointed at Tomasi and told him ‘*Uti ukawone!*’”

By the time Jalani finished the sentence, Nyalupeska had reeled backwards in a daze, crashing with audible impact against one of the huge storage pots which she kept in a neat row along the wall.

“Mzguli,” she bitterly mumbled the name to herself, still leaning against the earthen pot as if propping herself against the force of what she had just heard. “Must you do this to me, Mzguli?”

As far she was concerned, it could not have been much worse. Her last-born was in real danger. She knew only too well what kind of man Mzguli was; the very name spelt terror in Chitheba. Her father-in-law Panji would always be under widespread condemnation throughout Chitheba for ever allowing the wizard to settle in his village. And she and her family had personal cause to hate and fear the man: Everyone in Chitheba knew that her husband Kajanike had not died solely of wounds inflicted by the leopard. What had happened that tragic September day three years earlier was still fresh in people’s memories....

The leopard had made an unsuccessful attack on a herd of Musa village’s goats as they foraged about in a bush near the village. Old Panji, who was the only man around that

afternoon, was the first to respond to the frantic bleating of the goats, which had been wandering about untended by goatherds, as was usual during the dry season. Picking up his spears, he rushed to the scene of the commotion as fast as his stiff, aged legs would permit him. He soon sighted the leopard and began to chase it, yelling at the wild beast as he drove it deeper and deeper into the bush.

Perhaps angry that it had missed its prey, the leopard decided to ambush its pursuer. It quickly climbed high into a tall tree and quietly waited for the unsuspecting old man. And no sooner had old Panji reached the tree than the brute leapt down on him, knocking him to the ground before he realised what was happening.

Kajanike, who had heard the commotion while cutting reeds on the banks of the nearby Kasuntha stream, had joined the chase moments after old Panji had entered the bush. He was thus only a few metres behind the old man at the time of the ambush.

Rushing to his father's rescue, Kajanike hurled one of his spears at the leopard, hitting the animal deep into its left flank. The beast, turning its fury to its attacker, sprang off prostrate Panji and clung to Kajanike, digging its vicious claws deep into his neck as it wrestled him to the ground. But before he was brought down, Kajanike managed to thrust his other spear into the brute's heart.

As was later testified by both Kajanike and old Panji, the leopard, though still on top of Kajanike, was already half dead when Mzguli arrived on the scene and began to

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excitedly stab it with his spear. Yet the man claimed that he alone had killed the beast.

Recalling now that dreadful event, Nyalupeska, for the fiftieth time since that sorrowful day, wished her husband hadn't challenged Mzguli's claims. And the heartless man had made his claims even as Kajanike and old Panji were being rushed, on stretchers, to Ekwendeni hospital, some 30 bush-trail kilometres to the north of Chitheba. It was as if the man had joined the trip not to help carry the injured, but rather to try and convince the other villagers that he was the hero who had killed the leopard.

Failing to convince anyone, the wizard had decided to bewitch the challenger to his claims: How else could one explain the manner in which Kajanike had died? After having travelled all night without incident, the party was within sight of Ekwendeni when Jalani, who was carrying his father's stretcher with the help of another man, tripped on a mere twig. In his effort to regain balance he lost hold of the stretcher, causing his father to be thrown to the ground. When they picked him up, Kajanike, who had been able to talk throughout the night-long trip from Chitheba, was lifeless...

Suddenly bringing herself to the present, Nyalupeska jerked away from the big pot, leaned towards Jalani and whispered in an urgent voice: "We must have Tomasi protected, Manda. Tomorrow I will rise early and visit Wanthembo. He is always ready to help this family. He will give me the strongest medicine with which to protect my child from the evil man."

As a matter of fact, Jalani had also thought of consulting Wanthembo, Chitheba's renowned witchdoctor. But he had reservations. Not that he doubted Wanthembo's powers as a witchdoctor. By no means: Even now he could almost feel the throbbing of the pair of *simbo* on the inside of each of his wrists – scars of incisions through which Wanthembo had put into his blood protective medicine that would ward off any witchery aimed at him. For shortly after Kajanike's death, the witchdoctor had advised Nyalupeska that she and all her children needed such protection. Except Tomasi, who had simply laughed off the whole idea, they had all agreed to have the protection.

Thus Jalani now asked his mother: "But have you forgotten the scorn with which your son rejected the protection which the rest of us in this house have in our blood?"

"This time, Manda, he will not refuse," Nyalupeska said resolutely. "I will not allow him to refuse." She shifted her sitting position, as if the movement was intended to underline her resolve.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Nyalupeska emerged from Wanthembo's house the following morning she was rather surprised to see that Sinda mountain across Chitheba valley was already bathed in the yellowish morning sunlight. So her consultation with the witchdoctor had lasted that long? How time flew when one had an important matter to attend to! She was glad she had seen to it that this very necessary visit to the witch- doctor's house did not completely disrupt her daily domestic routine: She had brought along her water pot so that she could draw water on her way home. She had hidden the pot in the reeds by the confluence of Kasuntha stream and Bwalindi brook. For it was the cool water of tree-shaded Bwalindi that she was after.

Walking with the haste of one who had innumerable chores to catch up with, she quickly covered the three or so kilometres between Wanthembo's homestead at the foot of Mafwewu mountain and the Kasuntha-Bwalindi confluence. Not once as she had hurried down the slope had her thoughts left the little packet tied up in a corner of the

threadbare *chitenje* she was wearing around the skirt of her equally worn-out dress: For the packet, a green-leaf wrapping secured by a small string, contained the medicine Wanthembo had given her for the protection of Tomasi.

Having drawn the water, Nyalupeska was about to resume her homeward trip when she heard the metallic rattle of a bicycle. When the rider appeared above the bank, Nyalupeska's heart leaped. For it was Hara, headmaster of Chitheba Primary School. Not that it was unusual to see Hara in those parts. This diminutive but jovial and widely respected headmaster took great joy in visiting all the villages of Chitheba. His Rudge bicycle, which stood almost as tall as himself, was not an unfamiliar sight on the dusty trails of Chitheba. But he was now on the track between Musa and Thandeka villages, riding from the direction of the former. That was rather unusual, especially so early in the morning: Musa and Thandeka villages were each linked to the school by a direct trail; thus if he had business at Thandeka he would have ridden straight to that village. Obviously his present mission involved both Musa and Thandeka villages. And Nyalupeska could only think of Tomasi and the son of Kapopo at Thandeka, both of whom were at the moment nursing hopes of being selected for secondary school.

Hara, having dismounted, had hardly wheeled his bicycle to the bed of the stream when he noticed Nyalupeska standing rooted in the sand on the far bank, the water pot balanced on her head.

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“Avoid leaving your house so early in the morning, or you will miss good things!” the good-humoured headmaster called out to Nyalupeska without waiting for the usual exchange of greetings. His joking remark was accompanied by a broad grin that creased up his clean-shaved face, which was oiled to a gleam.

Judging from the man’s cheerful mood, Nyalupeska practically knew what news Hara had to tell. She barely suppressed her excitement as she hoisted the water pot off her head and set it down on the sand. Then she sat down beside it, respectfully gathering her *chitenje* about her as she prepared to exchange greetings with the distinguished headmaster. On his part, Hara was now pushing his bicycle up the bank towards Nyalupeska, still teasing her about the folly of leaving one’s house too early in the morning. He then laid the bicycle on the sand, walked over to Nyalupeska, respectfully shook hands with her in greeting and then squatted about a metre from her.

“Is all well, Hara?” Nyalupeska enquired.

Hara told her that all was well. Then he went on to say that he had good news for her. Tomasi and Mapopa Nkosi had been selected for William Koyi Secondary School, he told her. They were the only Chitheba pupils to have been selected for secondary education. He was not surprised that the two had been selected; they had been his brightest pupils. He had set off before sunrise to bring her the good news, but had been disappointed not to have found her in the village. Anyway, he had told Jalani and, of course,

Tomasi himself. He was now on his way to Thandeka village to tell Mapopa and his father Kapopo.

Although it was only two years old, William Koyi Secondary School was already well-known to Hara and Nyalupeska; for it had been built in memory of and named after a man they, as devout church elders, knew a lot about. William Koyi, a Xhosa from South Africa who came to Malawi's Northern Region, Mzimba district in particular, was well-known for his contribution during the beginnings of missionary work there. The team of Free Church of Scotland missionaries with whom he had come up from the Lovedale Missionary Institution in South Africa found Koyi invaluable in the setting up of their work in Northern Malawi. A large section of that part of the country was then under the rule of the Ngoni, a warlike and fiercely independent tribe that had originally come from South Africa in flight from the tribal wars unleashed by Shaka, the great Zulu war-lord of the early 19th century. The seat of the Ngoni chief, M'Mbelwa, was then, as it still is, in Mzimba district. Realising that they could do nothing without the blessing of the chief of this proud people, the missionaries depended entirely upon Koyi – who could speak Zulu, the language of the Ngoni – in their negotiations with M'Mbelwa. And, though Koyi commanded the confidence and respect of these former compatriots of his, so suspicious was M'Mbelwa of what the missionaries were proposing – the evangelisation of his people and the introduction of schools in his country – that

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Koyi played his crucial go-between role for what seemed an interminable period before the great chief finally gave the go-ahead.

Both Hara and Nyalupeska were only too aware of the debt owed to Koyi by the church in Northern Malawi; more especially their denomination, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, which the Scottish missionaries had established. The mere thought of Koyi would bring to their minds the tunes of some of their favourite hymns – soul-stirring compositions by Mawelera Tembo and Hezekiah Mavuvu Tweya, two of Koyi's first converts and pupils in Ngoniland. Hara and Nyalupeska readily appreciated that men like Tembo and Tweya, and other first fruits of the labours of Koyi and his fellow missionaries, had laid a firm foundation for the Presbyterian Church in their part of the country. And so when, two years earlier, the church in Northern Malawi, with funding from the Church of Scotland, built a secondary school and named it after William Koyi, they considered it a fitting monument to this man of God, this African for the Africans. Hara and Nyalupeska also considered the location of the school as most appropriate – a stone's throw from Edingeni, the village of the present Inkosi M'Mbelwa: It was fitting that Koyi's school be built near the village of the successor to a ruler who personally had been good friends with Koyi, even during the delicate negotiations between the great chief and the missionaries.

After Hara and Nyalupeska had expressed their mutual happiness that Tomasi would be going to study at a school

built in honour of a man they both held in such high esteem, it was time for Hara to be moving on. When he extended his hands for her to shake it good-bye, Nyalupeska grasped it with both hands and placed her left cheek on it, mumbling words of gratitude to the headmaster. She was so profuse in her thanks that one would have thought her son's selection was a personal gift from Hara. And when Hara tried to tell her that much of the credit had to go to Tomasi himself, she wouldn't hear of it:

"*Yayi, yayi, yayi*," she interjected, her voice sing-song with deep gratitude. "No, no, no: You did the work, Hara; you and your fellow teachers."

After Hara had finally rattled off, Nyalupeska picked up her water pot and, a song in her heart, crossed the stream as if on wings and half-ran up the bank.

She hadn't gone far from the stream when she saw the tall, slender form of Jalani hurrying down the winding footpath. She guessed what her son was up to; so, to let him know that she had already heard the good news, she broke into a light dance, ululating and lauding Tomasi in the praise poem of the Manda clan.

"You have heard then?" Jalani asked, smiling at his mother, who was now dancing expansively as she approached him, some of the water spilling out of the pot on her head as she swayed along.

"He has just left," a panting Nyalupeska practically sang out the words as she pointed in the direction of the stream. "Hara has just left. He told me all about it. Is it not

wonderful, Manda?" Her bright eyes danced beneath the dripping water pot as she looked at Jalani breathlessly.

"Really wonderful, mother," Jalani agreed, endeavouring not to let his mother's excitement infect him too much. Then he dropped his voice to a whisper: "Has Wanthembo given you the medicine?"

The question suddenly brought Nyalupeska from her cloud nine of happiness back to earth and its grim realities.

"Here it is, Manda," she replied in a lowered voice as she lifted the corner of her *chitenje* in which the little packet was securely tied.

"Good. Listen, mother: An idea has come into my mind – a plan which I believe will help us get Tomasi to accept the medicine. I decided to follow you so I could tell you my plan before you talk to Tomasi and ruin everything."

"Yes, Manda, what is your plan?" Nyalupeska asked anxiously. She made as if to lift the water pot off her head so that they could sit down and talk.

"No, mother, it is not necessary that we sit down. Let us talk as we walk." He led the way up to the path. "You see, mother, Tomasi is a very happy boy just now. All he can think of is going to secondary school. We could use that, mother, to make it easy for him to accept the medicine: Let us tell him a lie about this medicine; let us tell him that it is a *ranki*. We shall tell him that since he is going away to live among strangers, he needs to have in his blood a charm that will cause people to like him and do good things for him – something to bring him good luck in general. I am sure this

will make him more inclined to accept the medicine than if we told him it is meant to protect him from being bewitched: You know he scorns anything to do with witchcraft. In fact, we should not talk to him about what happened at the *mphala* last night until we have tried this plan.”

“That is a very good plan, Manda,” said Nyalupeska excitedly. “Since last night, I have been wondering how we were ever going to persuade him to accept the medicine. The problem is now solved. This plan will surely work. You have done well, Manda.”

As they neared the village compound, Jalani branched off into the bush, where he lingered until he reckoned his mother had entered the compound. The idea was that the two should not arouse suspicion in Tomasi by arriving together.

CHAPTER FIVE

For Tomasi, the good news could not have come at a better time. He was certain it had saved him from being flogged by Jalani. In fact – thanks to the good news, he was sure – his mother and Jalani did not even scold him for what had happened the night before. And when Mapopa Nkosi came down just before mid-day to rejoice with his friend over their success, Nyalupeska presented the two boys with a cockrel over which to celebrate their achievement. Jalani dramatically undertook the tasks of chasing the chicken, slaughtering it, dressing it and cutting it up. He explained to Tomasi that that was one way he could show his happiness at what his younger brother had achieved. In short, the mood and attitude of his mother and Jalani throughout the day convinced Tomasi that the two had decided to forget about the previous night.

In the evening, the attitude of the men at the *mphala* also pleasantly surprised Tomasi. They talked to him in a most agreeable manner as they congratulated him, proudly pointing out that he and the son of Kapopo were going to

be the first in Chitheba to go to secondary school. The only reminder of the previous night was a veiled observation by old Panji: "Learning is a good thing," the old man said as soon as the subject of Tomasi's success was brought up in the early moments of the evening. "However, many children these days have allowed it to burst their eyes. It has blinded them to certain facts of life on this earth." But, mercifully, the remark met with silence from the rest of the men. It seemed to Tomasi that everyone was anxious not to bring up what had happened the night before. He was certain, however, that if Mzguli had been around he would have used the old man's remark as an excuse to drag up the previous night's incident. Fortunately, the man had not yet come back from extracting honey from one of his bark beehives that were so numerous they seemed to be in every wooded ravine and every thicketed anthill in Chitheba.

Tomasi didn't stay long at the *mphala* that evening. After it became clear that no more bowls of *sima* would be coming, he whistled his way to his mother's kitchen hut. He knew that he and Nyalupeska had plenty to chat about.

When Jalani later came to join them in the hut, at first it appeared to Tomasi that his brother had come to continue sharing with the rest of the family the joy brought about by his latest achievement. But Tomasi smelt trouble when, moments after Jalani's arrival in the hut, his wife Nyahara, whom Tomasi had found discussing the family's good news with her mother-in-law, said good-night and left.

After Nyahara's departure there was a brief, rather uneasy

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silence among the three during which Nyalupeska's hand reached out behind one of her storage pots. In the light of the bright flames of the fire, Tomasi saw her drag forth a piece of potsherd. He could not make out what was in the black piece of pottery. He knew, however, that what glinted in it was a razor blade – and that was enough to make him realise what his mother and Jalani were up to. The previous night had not been forgotten after all. However, when his mother broke the silence he was rather pleasantly surprised that she introduced a matter quite unrelated to what he had expected.

Tomasi listened with patient politeness as Nyalupeska tried her best to talk him into seeing the need for having a luck charm in his blood now that, for the first time in his life, he was going to live among strangers. He felt somewhat relieved to learn that the stuff in the potsherd was not the so-called protective medicine he had suspected it was. However, he decided it had obviously been prescribed by the same witchdoctor. He now knew that Jalani had lied earlier that morning in telling headmaster Hara that Nyalupeska had left early for Thandeka village; it was now clear that his mother had gone to see Wanthembo about this so-called luck charm.

After Nyalupeska had finished, and Jalani, who was sitting on the usual goatskin by the door, had also had his say, the two of them anxiously waited for Tomasi's response.

Although somewhat relieved by the turn things had taken, Tomasi couldn't help feeling that the whole thing was

rather curious: He behaves in a manner considered dangerously rude; his elder brother no doubt reports the supposed impertinence to his mother; early the following morning – before she has even heard the news that he has been selected for secondary school – his mother goes to a witchdoctor and brings back a luck charm he is supposed to need in his new life as a secondary school student; and they were now trying to talk him into accepting this charm – without even a word about his supposedly dangerous impertinence of the previous night! Most curious. However, his response was being awaited.

Almost praying that he shouldn't say anything that might again be considered impertinent, Tomasi began: "Mother and brother, I realise that you are doing all this because you love me. But I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you the same way I did two years ago...."

"But this is not protective medicine, my child," Nyalupeska cut in, holding out towards Tomasi the potsherd, which he could now see contained some greenish powder. The appearance of the stuff vaguely reminded him of the so-called protective medicine he had rejected two years before.

"Listen, Tomasi," said Jalani as he changed from the sitting to the squatting position, presuming that in the latter position he could the better do verbal battle with his stubborn younger brother. "This has nothing to do with witchcraft – we know only too well what you think of that. This is simply a charm that will make people like you, do

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nice things to you, help you – something that will make you lucky in general. What could anyone have against that kind of thing?”

Tomasi could hardly believe his ears: In accepting his views on witchcraft his elder brother was as good as giving him the green-light to continue disregarding the belief! For Jalani to do that was a miracle – a miracle no doubt worked by his selection for secondary school. It all made him confident that he was going to get his mother and Jalani to see why he didn't believe in charms, and why they too shouldn't.

“I don't see any difference between a luck charm and protection against witchcraft, brother,” he launched his lecture. “They both go against reason: People die of natural causes – for example, accidents, snakebites and illness brought about by germs. Yet people in this area think that every death is caused by witchcraft. However, supposing it was true that there was witchcraft, would it then mean that people would not die if there were no witchcraft?”

“You don't know what you are saying, child,” said Nyalupeska, contemptuously dismissing her young one's cocksure little speech. But Jalani was quick to break in, fearing she might go on to say something that could ruin their chances with Tomasi.

“All right, mother,” he said. “He has told us what he feels about witchcraft, although we have assured him this has nothing to do with witchcraft. Now let him go on and tell us why he links something as good and un-evil as a luck charm with witchcraft.”

"I find it unreasonable to believe that a mere root, bark or leaf can cause people to like you, whether you wear it on you or have its powder put into your blood," Tomasi said. He paused, half expecting Jalani to slap him for practically calling his mother and elder brother unreasonable. Seeing that Jalani, his ears cocked, continued to stare straight ahead, he went on: "That is impossible! People tend to like you for what you are as a person. People do nice things to you simply because they want to, or because they feel you deserve their help. Nothing else – root, bark, leaf or any other thing – will make people do to you what they don't feel like doing, or what they don't feel you deserve. So I reject luck charms for the same reason I reject anti-witchcraft medicine – they are both unreasonable."

Eyes politely cast on the floor before him, Tomasi paused again to determine if he had made his already hostile audience even more hostile. From the direction of Jalani on his right he heard a deep sigh of frustration. Also, as he had heard no crackling of the wrinkled goatskin, he knew Jalani was still in the determined squatting position. So he realised that the battle was still on.

But what he saw when, lifting his head a little, he stole a glance at his mother on the other side of the bright fire broke his heart. Her face distorted with deep distress, Nyalupeska was gazing at him dejectedly. She was obviously fighting tears, for he could see her lips were moving soundlessly as she feebly shook her head in utter despair. Tomasi simply couldn't understand why she should so

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desperately want him to have the charm. He had intended to try, after the pause, to appeal to her religion, her belief in God. He was even going to dare tell Nyalupeska that as a church elder it was hypocritical of her to believe in witchcraft and luck charms. But seeing the state she was in, he decided not to. He had never seen her like that before, and it scared him into giving in. It really wasn't worth causing his mother all that distress; there could be no harm in having a little of that totally useless powder rubbed into his blood.

"Really, mother, how can you take this whole thing so seriously?" he asked in a pained voice. "Very well, I will have the charm. Not that I believe in it; but because I do not wish to see you suffer unnecessarily."

The effect of Tomasi's submission on Nyalupeska was instantaneous. Long before Tomasi finished talking, even the slightest sign of anguish had vanished from her face. Unsmiling, though plainly relieved, she stirred the fire – which was already burning brightly – so that she could have even more light in which to make the pair of incisions on the inside of each of Tomasi's wrists, through which the powder was to be rubbed into his blood.

"You need it, my child," she said as she stepped over to Tomasi's side of the fire place to perform the little operation.

"Yes, you need it, Tomasi," Jalani said after stealing a brief sigh of relief. The goatskin crackled as he finally settled down into the sitting position again.

CHAPTER SIX

It was now a week later and Tomasi and his friend Mapopa Nkosi were at Emoneni bus stop, waiting for the morning Mzuzu-Mzimba bus. When it eventually arrived, the bus was so full that it would not have picked them up had there been no passengers getting off. The driver had even indicated to Tomasi and Mapopa that there was no room on his bus by rolling past the usual stopping point and pulling up some one hundred metres farther down the road. Nevertheless, as soon as it was clear that the bus was going to stop after all, the two picked up their suitcases and chased after it. Fortunately for them, the man and wife who were disembarking had to deal with three young children and a lot of luggage. Thus by the time the alighting couple had claimed their last piece of luggage from the bus, Tomasi and Mapopa had put their suitcases on the roof rack and were squeezing their way into the packed vehicle.

When several passengers got off at the next stop and Tomasi was able to move forward a little, he found himself

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standing beside a seat occupied by two white ladies. This was the first time for him to be so near white people. Having never ventured very far from remote Chitheba until now, he had seen whites only during the few occasions when something took him to Kafukule, Emoneni and other roadside settlements near Chitheba. Even then they had been little more than white faces that flashed by in cars. One of his teachers at Chitheba had told him that some of the teachers at William Koyi Secondary School were white. He wondered now whether it was going to be easy to understand their English. He didn't have long to find out though, for even as the thought entered his mind the bus lurched so violently that he bumped into the shoulder of the white lady nearer to him.

"Sorry, madam," he said, thoroughly embarrassed.

"It's okay," said the lady, beaming at him a broad smile that caused her blue eyes to narrow to slits beneath the yellow cloth hat she was wearing to protect her hair from dust. "Which secondary school do you go to?" she asked, still smiling at him.

Tomasi was certain he had misheard her: What could have made her associate him with a secondary school? Surely he hadn't already begun to look like a secondary school student?

She must have said something else. And so, stooping in order to hear her better, he said "Pardon?" And when she repeated the question, he took a quick glance at the bag of books in his right hand, wondering if it was the bulging

briefcase that made him look like a student. "I'm going to start Form 1 at William Koyi Secondary School," he told her.

"Really?" the lady exclaimed. "That's our school!" she added, motioning to her friend, who was sleeping beside her, her head, protected from dust by a bright-red cloth hat, cushioned by a pillow propped up against the window. "We teach there. Welcome to William Koyi."

Caught off-guard by this unexpected information, Tomasi could only say 'yes' and smile back at her. His first thought was to tell Mapopa about his discovery; but his friend was now about four standing passengers behind him.

The lady tried a couple of times to maintain a conversation with Tomasi; but, noting that the roaring and rattling of the ancient bus made it difficult for him to hear her without having to stoop, she reluctantly gave up and contented herself with watching the landscape of Mtangatanga Forest Reserve rushing by outside.

Tomasi was glad the lady had stopped talking. Not only was it difficult to hear her with all the noise, but also, from sheer lack of previous experience, he felt rather uneasy talking to a white person. But then the bus suddenly started to hiccup and cough, causing the passengers to begin talking with dread of an impending breakdown. Tomasi despaired; he knew a breakdown would provide the white lady an opportunity to talk to him even more. He desperately wanted the task of getting used to talking to his white teachers to be postponed until he reached school. But it

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wasn't to be; for, sure enough, just before the Viphya road junction, some twelve kilometres before Mzimba, the engine let out a giant cough and then went dead, totally unresponsive to the driver's frantic efforts. Swinging the coasting vehicle off the centre of the road and easing it along the left edge, the driver parked it, to a loud chorus of bitter protest from the passengers.

It was the second breakdown on that trip. The first one had occurred barely seven kilometres out of Mzuzu, and took two hours to put right. As insurance against further breakdowns, the bus company officials in Mzuzu had detailed the mechanic, who had to be fetched from the depot, to stay on the bus till it would return to Mzuzu that evening.

"What's this again, Janet?" the white lady who had been taking a nap asked her seat mate with some concern. "Not another breakdown!"

"It looks like it, Heather," said the other lady. "And if this one also takes two hours to fix, we'll miss the Unyolo bus," she added after glancing at her watch and seeing that it was 2 p.m. Then, suddenly looking up at Tomasi, she said, "Oh! Tomasi..."

"Yes, madam?" said Tomasi, stooping so as to hear her better in the noise of the passengers' loud protests.

"This is Miss Woodcock," said the lady, indicating her seat mate. "She'll be your English teacher." Then, turning to her colleague, she motioned to Tomasi and said, "Heather, this is Tomasi. He's going to start Form 1 at William Koyi."

"Really?" cried out Miss Heather Woodcock, extending her right hand to Tomasi, her plump round face wearing a huge smile. "How do you do?"

"How do you do?" Tomasi returned, shaking the lady's delicate and soft hand. He felt very pleased with himself to have remembered that correct (if nonsensical) response to the formality, which suddenly made him so confident of himself that he wondered why he had ever doubted his ability to carry on a conversation with those whites.

Moreover, the ladies themselves already seemed very pleasant to him. Particularly warm and cheerful was the one who had first made his acquaintance. She had introduced herself as Miss Briggs, a history teacher. She was a slim young lady with a heart-shaped face covered with freckles. Noting the few strands of reddish-brown hair that hang loose outside her yellow hat, Tomasi recalled reading somewhere that white ladies with that colour of hair were called red heads. Again, to have remembered that fact somehow made him confident he could talk to whites without much difficulty.

Miss Woodcock was hardly less nice and cheerful than Miss Briggs, if a bit calm compared to her excitable colleague. She was a plump young lady with hands unusually small for her fleshy arms. Perhaps because of the way she had done her long yellowish hair, it somewhat surprised Tomasi that she was the calmer of the two ladies: She had plaited her hair into two long braids that emerged from under her bright-red hat at the ears and hang all the

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way to her lap. Tomasi noted that the braids had been made exactly the way he and his two boy cousins back at the village plaited the mupapa-bark lasso with which they tied together by the hocks the hind legs of cows at milking time. To Tomasi that was a playful way to do one's hair; thus it made him expect Miss Woodcock to be more jovial than Miss Briggs. Anyway, he recalled reading somewhere that white ladies with hair the colour of Miss Woodcock's were known as blondes. And once again the recollection somehow increased his feeling that he could hold his own in a conversation with white people.

Presently, the two ladies, finding it rather hot inside the stationary bus, excused themselves from Tomasi, telling him they would like to stand in the fresh air outside. Tomasi took the opportunity to beckon to Mapopa, who was among the standing passengers still on the bus. While he awaited Mapopa to come to him from the back of the bus, Tomasi followed the ladies with his eyes as they walked to the shade of a musuku tree.

"Those are our teachers," Tomasi announced to Mapopa when the latter joined him.

"They are teachers at William Koyi?" Mapopa asked as he peered with great interest through the window at the two ladies.

"Yes. The big one teaches English and the other one history."

"I noticed you were talking to them. It must be very difficult to understand their English." Like Tomasi, Mapopa had never talked with a white person.

“Not really. The big one is a bit difficult to understand; it’s sometimes hard to catch what she’s saying. But I really like her accent. Just wait until you hear her talk. Her accent is so delicious that it even makes you salivate...” He imitated the clipped British accent of Miss Woodcock. “The small one,” he continued after the two of them had briefly burst into half-suppressed laughter at his mimicry, “is easier to understand. She speaks more slowly. But her accent...” He broke off and mimicked the broad American drawl of Miss Briggs. Once again the two went into hearty giggling at the imitation.

“I don’t think you’ll find it very difficult to understand the white teachers at school,” Mapopa said. “Your English is very good. It’s I who should worry: I don’t know how I’ll manage with my little English.”

Slim, soot-dark, large-eared and a head and shoulders shorter than Tomasi, Mapopa had been Tomasi’s friend ever since the two of them had started school together nine years earlier. Perhaps their friendship had been kicked off by the rather interesting manner in which old Kadazi, their teacher in Standard 1, used to treat the boys: The youngsters used to be extremely good at arithmetic, so good that they were always far ahead of the rest of the class in the subject. Old Kadazi had an amusing way of showing his pride in the boys’ ability with figures. During break time, when all the pupils were playing outside, he would write two difficult sums on the black wall. Then, just before the bell to end the break rang, he would call in Tomasi and Mapopa and, sitting

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on his folding chair, hide them under the voluminous overcoat he always wore, much like a hen hides her brood of chicks under her wings. After the class was back in session, the old man would ask those pupils who thought they knew the answer to either of the sums on the black wall to raise their hands. There would follow a flurry of whispers as the youngsters would audibly count their calculations off their fingers and toes. One little hand after another would triumphantly shoot up; but, of course, all the answers would be wrong. Then old Kadazi would lift his overcoat and Tomasi and Mapopa would step forth. He would then assign one of the sums to Tomasi and the other to Mapopa. After the briefest calculation on their fingers and toes, the two boys would proudly shout out their respective correct answer almost simultaneously.

“Why can’t you be as good as Tomasi and Mapopa at sums?” a proud Kadazi would reproachfully ask the rest of the class. “All you are good at is eating beans!”

Apparently, this special attention they got from old Kadazi gave Tomasi and Mapopa the feeling that they had something in common. They always moved together at school, a quaint pair whose distinctive features were Tomasi’s big brick-shaped head and Mapopa’s unusually large ears. Their fellow pupils came to believe that a brick-shaped head and extra-large ears were signs of intelligence.

As the boys went from one class to another, Tomasi became less and less good at arithmetic, while Mapopa seemed to get better and better at the subject. Those who

knew Tomasi's reading habits after he had sufficiently acquired this skill attributed his dwindling ability at numbers to his increasing interest in reading English books. Of all the subjects on the school's timetable, it seemed English was the only one he really cared for. And he was extremely good at it; so good, in fact, that by the time he reached the final class in primary school it was an open secret that he could speak and write English better than a number of teachers at Chitheba Primary School. He was always top of the class in the subject. At the same time, however, he had become so poor at arithmetic that he was always far below average in it. His ability in English won him considerable popularity and admiration among his fellow pupils, especially the way he made use of the language during debates. It was the talk of the school that in any debate, Tomasi's side never lost. But he always felt it would have been much better to have Mapopa's popularity, which came from his being the class's wizard in arithmetic. Most of the girls in Standard 8 were poor at arithmetic; so they were always around Mapopa, being helped with one arithmetic problem or another. How that made Tomasi envy his friend!

And now, in the bus on their way to secondary school, Tomasi wasn't altogether sure whether to agree with what Mapopa had just said, namely that he, Tomasi, need not worry, because his English was good: There was maths in secondary school. There were also science subjects, some of which, as his teachers at Chitheba had warned him, involved a lot of mathematical calculations. Was his being good at

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English going to be of any help in those subjects? Perhaps it was he, not Mapopa, who should worry.

“Oh dear!” said Mapopa suddenly. “It looks like this bus will take longer to repair than we think.”

“So it does,” Tomasi agreed. “Let’s go and see what’s happening outside.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Tomasi!” Miss Briggs called as soon as she saw Tomasi and Mapopa step down from the bus.

“Madam!” Tomasi called back, avoiding just in time saying ‘sir!’ as he was used to responding to calls by the all-male teachers back at Chitheba Primary School.

“There’s enough shade over here for two more people!” Miss Briggs said as she smilingly beckoned the two boys.

Somewhat self-conscious at being given such public attention by a white person, Tomasi led the way to the musuku tree.

After Tomasi had made the introductions and the two ladies had shrieked their delight upon learning that Mapopa was also to be their student, a general chit-chat followed during which the two boys were asked all sorts of questions about their family backgrounds, life in their home area, what they wanted to become in life, and many more. On their part, Tomasi and Mapopa learnt that Miss Woodcock was from England and came to Malawi the year before under the British Voluntary Service Overseas, while Miss Briggs, an

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American, was a Peace Corps Volunteer who was just beginning the final year of her term of service. The ladies also told them that they were returning from Mzuzu, where they had been spending the weekend with friends.

“Is that all the luggage you’re travelling with?” Miss Briggs asked Tomasi, indicating the battered brown briefcase sitting at his feet on the dry musuku leaves. She wasn’t merely being inquisitive; her question was a genuine one, prompted by Tomasi’s quite obvious poverty. She had noticed that Mapopa, who was wearing black corduroy trousers, a red long-sleeved shirt that didn’t look more than a few months old, and a pair of fairly new leather shoes, was far better dressed than bare-foot Tomasi, who was wearing khaki shorts with frayed hems and an equally worn-out though clean short-sleeved shirt. The fact, therefore, that Tomasi – and not well-dressed Mapopa – possessed a briefcase, plus the fact that the briefcase looked full, made Miss Briggs wonder if the bag contained all of Tomasi’s no doubt very few belongings.

“No, madam. I have a suitcase on the roof rack,” Tomasi told her.

“Then what do you have in there?” Miss Briggs couldn’t help but ask, pointing at the bulging briefcase.

“Books.”

“Books?” the two ladies exclaimed together.

“All those?” asked Miss Woodcock. “You really shouldn’t have bothered to bring them, Tomasi. You will find more books in the library than you’ll be able to read

during all the four years you'll be at William Koyi." Then, suddenly finding it curious that a boy of Tomasi's rural background should possess so many books, she said, "What sort of books are they, anyway? Can we see some of them?"

Tomasi squatted to open the briefcase, only to hesitate when an aroma reminded him of the bag's other contents besides books: His grandmother, Gogo Chemeni, had given him a packet of roasted groundnuts. Aren't the ladies going to discover that he was carrying nuts? For a moment he wished he had left the briefcase on the bus, which he would gladly have done if he hadn't put in it the envelope containing that term's school fees plus the money his mother had given him to buy a pair of canvas shoes at Mzimba. At any rate, the ladies must not know about the nuts. So, turning the briefcase around in such a way that when it was opened its flap would hide the inside of the bag from the ladies' view, he pushed the lock open and lifted the flap. Hands working suspiciously fast, he pulled out all the books and then quickly snapped the bag shut.

Miss Woodcock stepped over to the pile of about a dozen old copies of *Reader's Digest* and several thick volumes of ancient-looking novels, most of them coverless and spineless. She was quite fascinated to find in the collection novels by some British authors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Leafing through one of the novels, she noticed that the several dozen pages that had been read were extensively underlined. It surprised her that, rather than whole

passages, only single words, phrases and an occasional individual sentence had been underlined.

“Why the underlining, Tomasi?” she enquired, showing him a page of the novel.

“Oh that?” said Tomasi, shyly turning his eyes away from her as if the lady had uncovered some embarrassing secret. “That’s for my vocabulary. I – I copy – I mean – ”

“Whenever he’s reading,” said Mapopa, coming to the rescue of his suddenly tongued-tied friend, “he underlines words and expressions that he finds interesting. Later on he jots down on a piece of paper his own sentences using the newly-learnt words and expressions.”

At this information from Mapopa, Miss Briggs, who had been inspecting a tattered copy of *Reader’s Digest* which apparently had not yet been read by Tomasi, went over to look at the underlining Miss Woodcock was referring to. The two ladies then looked at each other and smiled understandingly.

“How did you come by all these books, Tomasi?” Miss Woodcock wanted to know after she and Miss Briggs had looked through the lot.

“My late father and other men in my area brought them from South Africa, where they used to work long ago,” Tomasi replied as he repacked the books.

“Tomasi,” said Miss Briggs in a tone that reflected how difficult she was finding it to believe what she had just seen, “can you understand some of these books?”

“I have a dictionary at home,” was Tomasi’s simple reply.

“Most interesting, isn’t it, Janet?” said Miss Woodcock to Miss Briggs, who could only nod assent to her colleague’s observation while staring in silent astonishment down at Tomasi, who was still repacking the books. Both ladies were at that moment thinking, ‘No wonder the boy speaks such good English.’

Meanwhile, the mechanic, clad in his oily blue overalls, was still lying on his back under the front of the bus, hammering here and turning a nut there. A whole hour had elapsed since the bus had broken down, and nearly all the passengers had come out of the disabled vehicle and were standing in little grumbling groups on the dusty dry grass along the embankments.

Then presently, everyone’s hopes rose when the mechanic emerged from underneath the bus and climbed into the driver’s seat. And, sure enough, the engine roared back to life. The mechanic revved it up a dozen times to test it. Satisfied with its condition, he let it idle away and went back outside to gather his tools and to announce to the driver that his machine was ready to roll again. And soon the breakdown-weary passengers were once again being bounced along on the badly corrugated road.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It wasn't until about two hours after the arrival of Tomasi and company at Mzimba bus station that the Unyolo bus finally emerged from the depot and roared into the station. And it was another hour before the crammed, much-delayed bus lumbered into the sunset, more than half its passengers comprising boys and girls going to start Form 1 at William Koyi Secondary School.

Around 8 p.m. the bus came to a screeching stop at the turn-off to William Koyi and the students and their two lady teachers alighted. Dusty and many of them travel-weary, they tramped along the three-kilometre road that led to their school, the darkness of the way ahead barely alleviated by the thin beam of Miss Woodcock's torch.

The group had hardly entered the school campus when they met Mr and Mrs Masiye, the boarding master and girl's matron, respectively. Since the Masiyes, whose house was right by the main gate, happened to be at the time leaving for their nightly rounds of their respective charges, the two lady teachers were able to leave the boys and girls in the couple's hands.

The Masiyes first took the new students to the administration block, where, in a corridor lit by a light bulb powered by the school's diesel generator, a notice board between the headmaster's office and staff room displayed lists of student names for each class and hostel.

Tomasi and Mapopa found that they had been separated both in class and hostel: Tomasi had been put in Form 1A and assigned to M'Mbwelwa hostel (named after the Ngoni chief in whose country William Koyi did the work to which this school was a monument), while Mapopa was in Form 1B and in Elmslie hostel (named after Walter Elmslie, a Scottish medical missionary with whom William Koyi had worked during his early days in Ngoniland).

* * *

Nearly four years since the foundation stone for William Koyi Secondary School had been laid, the campus was still buzzing with construction activity. As each year a new form was introduced at the school, the face of the campus was constantly being altered by new teachers' houses, hostels, classroom blocks and other buildings. For example, Hezekia Tweya hostel for boys (named after one of Koyi's first converts, who became the first ordained minister in Ngoniland) and Jessie Nyagondwe hostel for girls (named after the only female Malawian hymn composer featured in the *Sumu za Ukhristu* hymnal) had just been completed. So had a new classroom block, located not far from the hitherto only one.

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The older classroom block was a long four-roomed building filled with plenty of air and sunlight. It was roofed with corrugated iron sheets painted green (as were all the other buildings on the campus) and was split across the middle by a corridor. At one end of the corridor a flight of steps descended to the front lawn, while at the other end another set of steps led to the back lawn. To the east of the back lawn were the three boys' hostels and beyond them the line of teachers' houses formed the eastern edge of the campus. In the southern corner of the campus was a cluster of buildings consisting of the administration block, the science lab and the library. And between these buildings and the boys' hostels was an expanse of open ground on one patch of which construction workers were toiling on the foundation of the school hall.

As the school did not yet have an assembly hall, each week-day morning, after breakfast and before classes, students lined up according to their classes on the back lawn of the older classroom block. The lines faced the building's steps, for it was on these steps that the headmaster stood as he presided over morning prayers and thereafter made announcements whenever he had any.

* * *

Standing right in the middle of the Form 1A line, which was the first from the steps, Tomasi was rather nervous on his first day of school. He felt stiff in his new blue shorts

and white shirt. And the new brown canvas shoes, his first pair ever, pinched his feet inside the grey socks.

When the hum of the students' chatter suddenly died down, Tomasi looked over his left shoulder in the direction of the administration building. It was obvious that the well-dressed man striding smartly down the path towards the student lines was Mr Vincent Sakala, the headmaster.

A slight but admirably poised middle-aged man, Mr Sakala always held his head high when he walked. And he walked with vigorous strides, heels striking the ground in smart footfalls. On this first day for him to see the neatly dressed man, Tomasi was so captivated by Mr Sakala's walking style that his eyes followed the headmaster until he ascended to the third step, where he smartly turned round to face the students.

The headmaster having arrived, the school's six teachers, who had been chatting away in the corridor while waiting for the boss, moved nearer to the steps and stood facing the student lines. And one of them, whose turn it was to lead in prayers that morning, descended to within two steps behind the headmaster, stood reverently and said a prayer. After the prayer the headmaster began to address the students. First, he welcomed the Form 1 students, saying he hoped they would enjoy their stay at William Koyi and find it rewarding, both academically and socially. Then he introduced members of the teaching staff to the new students. Having nothing else to say to the students, he signalled to the teacher who had said the prayer to lead in

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the singing of the National Anthem. The teacher snapped to attention and started the song, the students and everybody else joining in at the fifth note. After all the three verses had been sung through, the headmaster dismissed the assembly and strode to the administration block.

Tomasi was thoroughly charmed by Mr Sakala during that first assembly. From his position in the middle of the front line, he was able to see the man in great detail. He took note of his well-tailored dark suit; his immaculate white shirt, complete with cuff links; his neatly knotted red-and-white striped tie; and his pointed black shoes, polished to a gleam. He thoroughly enjoyed Mr Sakala's accent, which – remarkably, he felt – was very nearly as deliciously clipped as Miss Woodcock's. In fact, it wasn't just the man's accent that thrilled Tomasi. Equally admirable to him were Mr Sakala's general speech mannerisms – the occasional smart jerking of the shoulder to shrug off a point, the frequent use of elegantly articulated 'Oh's and 'Well's, and the always half-suppressed laugh and half-restrained smile. And when he later came to discover what he felt had given this sophisticated man his charming personality, Tomasi made a firm promise to himself...

Mr Sakala had been nicknamed 'Britain' by the students. At first Tomasi did not know why, although he suspected it had something to do with the man's personality. Then a fellow student confirmed his suspicion when he informed him that an old friend of the headmaster's had told him that Mr Sakala had been a student at Blantyre Secondary School

at a time when that school's headmaster was a Briton. Several years after completion of his secondary education Mr Sakala had gone to study in Britain and, upon returning home, he had been appointed the first headmaster of the new William Koyi Secondary School. According to this old friend of the headmaster's, ever since his return from Britain Mr Sakala walked, spoke and generally behaved very much like that British headmaster of his secondary school days.

After hearing this story, Tomasi promised himself to work very hard on his studies so that he could go to the university and thereafter stand a chance of being sent to Britain – like Mr Sakala, his idol.

CHAPTER NINE

One Saturday afternoon about half-way through his first term, Tomasi was called by Miss Woodcock to the bungalow she shared with Miss Briggs. As he walked towards the house, he wondered why the lady wanted to see him. Not that he was unaccustomed to being asked home by Miss Woodcock. On the contrary, he had been in and out of the two ladies house perhaps more than any other student during the few weeks he had been at school. And each of his visits to the house had been at the invitation of Miss Woodcock, who made no secret of her liking for Tomasi on account of the boy's love of books and his surprisingly good command of the English language. In fact, Tomasi had so impressed Miss Woodcock that only the previous week the lady, a staff librarian, appointed him a student librarian to replace a former Form 2 student – another book worm – who had been expressed from school for failure to pay school fees.

“I’m sure you know that James was teaching me Chitumbuka,” Miss Woodcock began as she and Tomasi

sipped coca-cola in the bungalow's huge sitting room whose entire front was taken up by three roof-to-floor louvered windows.

"Yes, madam," Tomasi said, his voice sad at the mention of the unfortunate James Mwenifumbo, his best friend. The two, who were room mates, owed their friendship to having three things in common: an immense love of books, an unbounded fascination for the English language and a great admiration for their headmaster's personality. In fact, it was James who had told Tomasi about Mr Sakala's debt to that British headmaster down south. The two boys had already spent many a dreamy moment of their young friendship talking about how they planned to behave exactly like Mr Sakala when they got employed after completing their education. Then one Friday afternoon, James had been summoned by Mr Sakala. He had come back from the headmaster's office in tears, explaining to Tomasi that Mr Sakala had expelled him with immediate effect for having failed to pay his school fees not only for that term but also for the final term of the previous academic year. And so, the next morning James, the only son of his widowed and helplessly poor mother, had left for his home in Karonga, the money for his transport having been kindly provided by Miss Woodcock and Miss Briggs.

"I'd like my lessons in your beautiful mother language to continue," Miss Woodcock said. "Do you suppose you'd find the time to give me two lessons a week till James comes back?"

"Is he coming back, madam?" Tomasi asked, breaking in almost before the lady had finished. Such was his excitement at the mere thought of his friend coming back.

"Oh, I'm sure he will. His being sent home will certainly force his people into doing something about his fees."

"He told me there's only him and his widow mother," Tomasi said, rather disappointed: He had hoped she would tell him something more definite about his friend's chances of coming back to school.

"Someone among his relatives will surely help him this time," said Miss Woodcock.

"I hope so," Tomasi said weakly, his eye running along the well-stocked bookshelves that took up nearly half the length of the wall before him. From where he was sitting he could pick out several titles which he had already borrowed at the recommendation of James. Then he suddenly remembered that Miss Woodcock had made a request. It was an offer, really, for she paid well for the service. "Yes, I think I would find the time," he said. "That is, if you think I can do a good job."

"Oh, I have no doubt you can, Tomasi. Shall we say Wednesdays and Thursdays after class? You are not on library duty on these days."

"As a matter of fact, those are the days I was going to suggest."

"Good. Can we start next week?"

"Yes, madam."

As it turned out, Tomasi 'stood in' for James as Miss

Woodcock's Chitumbuka teacher for the rest of the term. Apart from being a matter of deep regret for him, his friend's failure to return to school also set him thinking that the same thing might well happen to him. A week or so after James' expulsion, Tomasi's mother had written to inform him that the family's bull had been sold. But a quick calculation enabled Tomasi to see that after Nyalupeska used some of the money to pay back what she had borrowed for his fees for that term, the rest of the amount generated through the sale of the animal would be just enough to meet the fees for that year's remaining two terms. True, the fact that his grandfather was still alive made his situation more hopeful than that of his friend; but he really didn't think he could count on the old man, despite all the cattle he owned.

Tomasi had reason to be less than hopeful of being helped by old Panji. He had the misfortune of being born in the household of Gogo Chemeni, the old man's elder and less loved wife. Old Panji's younger wife, Gogo Nyamumba, had been his favourite wife until she passed away some five years ago. In fact, before Gogo Nyamumba's death the old man hardly ever set foot into Gogo Chemeni's house. In those days, if he was neither at the *mphala* nor in his hut where he lived alone as though a bachelor, then he was in Gogo Nyamumba's house. In their turn, the two sons and four daughters old Panji had had with Gogo Nyamumba found more favour with him than did old Kajanike (Tomasi's late father) and his three sisters, the old man's

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children with Gogo Chemeni. In fact, old Panji still treated the families of Gogo Nyamumba and Gogo Chemeni in such a way as to give the impression that he belonged more to the household of the late Gogo Nyamumba than that of Gogo Chemeni. Before he died, Kajanike, who was the oldest of all the old man's children, used to severely criticize his father for his obvious favouritism in his dealings with his two wives' households. But such criticism seemed only to make old Panji more distant from Gogo Chemeni's household. It was also on several occasions misinterpreted by Julizga and Gwaza, the old man's two sons with Gogo Nyamumba, who felt it was aimed at them as well. The result of all this had been the estrangement of not only old Panji but also of the entire Gogo Nyamumba household from Gogo Chemeni's household.

With such a family background, Tomasi could easily see himself suffering the same fate as that which had befallen James. His schooling might well be terminated in the second year. And the end of his first term at William Koyi found him still troubled by this unhappy thought.

CHAPTER TEN

News that Tomasi and Mapopa were back in Chitheba for their first holidays reached old Kadazi around sunset on the Saturday of their arrival. It was brought to him by one of his grandchildren whom Thetisa, his wife, had sent to buy some salt at the grocery.

“You actually saw them?” asked the old man, beaming a toothless but proud smile at his grandson as if the 12-year-old youngster were Tomasi and Mapopa themselves. “*Nkhwengwe za* Chitheba (Chitheba’s heroes) – our first secondary school students. What did they look like? I’m sure they are healthier and cleaner....” On and on he went, not really expecting any response from the little one, for he was only thinking aloud about his two child heroes.

Old Kadazi’s pride at Tomasi and Mapopa being in secondary school was as great as that of the two boys’ parents. For one thing, the lads were a kind of personal success for him. Although he had retired as a teacher seven years earlier (the year Tomasi and Mapopa entered Standard 2), he always followed with keen interest the progress of the

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boys' education. Each time he met their teachers or parents he would enquire how the boys were getting on with their schoolwork. It was a matter of pride for him to be told year after year that the youngsters were top of their class. And when, sailing through the primary school leaving examinations at first attempt, the boys were selected for secondary school, he understandably felt that it was in large measure due to the firm foundation he had laid for them as their first teacher.

There was also a less personal reason why the old man was proud of Tomasi and Mapopa: The lads had made come true a dream he had long nursed for Chitheba. Deeply devoted to this fertile and scenic area – with its wooded hills and craggy mountain ridges, with its deep ravines cutting across woodlands that teemed with game and abounded in all sorts of wild fruits, and with its meandering streams whose banks of dazzling white sand were punctuated by stretches of lush reed thickets – old Kadazi had for many years felt a pang of regret that his beloved Chitheba could not boast of even a single secondary school student. Every year hopes would rise that at least one pupil from Chitheba Primary School would be selected for secondary education; but year after year would end with such hopes being dashed. Many sons and daughters of Chitheba had repeated Standard 8 several times, becoming more hopeful of being selected each repeated year. But they had all given up the struggle in disappointment, and had either married or wandered off to towns to look for jobs of

little value. Education, old Kadazi was convinced, not only elevated the name of an area, but was also a guarantee of its future social and material development. Chitheba may be an enchantingly beautiful area, but its poor record in education lowered its esteem and placed its progress in doubt. And what was most humiliating about the whole thing was that all the other areas around Chitheba already had many of their young people in secondary schools; in fact, one of them could even boast of having a student at the university. Old Kadazi, already in his eighties, had begun to wonder whether his greatest desire for Chitheba would happen during his lifetime when Tomasi and Mapopa's selection for secondary school finally set his heart at rest.

Besides being keen on Chitheba's social and economic progress, old Kadazi was also deeply committed to the area's spiritual well-being. Ever since his retirement from teaching he devoted much of his time and energy to the activities of the local church, particularly to organizing the weekly Sunday worship service. There were many things which old age has forced him to slow down on, but they did not include his involvement in the Sunday service. On the contrary, it seemed the older he got, the more active he became in ensuring that each Sunday morning a good worship service was organized at the local church. He firmly believed that the Sunday service was of vital importance to believers, not only because it was a time for them to worship the Lord, but also because, through the Word preached and the hymns sung, it renewed their

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strength in the spiritual battle against the Evil One. And God knew that believers in Chitheba badly needed this weekly renewal of their spiritual strength, for here the enemy wielded a particularly effective weapon – beer. The fertile hill soils of Chitheba produced more and more millet each year, which in turn resulted in a steady yearly increase in the frequency of beer drinks in the villages. Thus many souls were being drowned in the beer calabash every year. This devastation of the area by the local brew had to be continually countered by the soldiers of the Cross.

That night, therefore, all the old man could think of was the following day's Sunday service. Certain that Tomasi and Mapopa would attend it, he decided to lead it himself so that he could prepare a sermon and select hymns appropriate to the occasion: For this was a significant service, one at which the people of Chitheba ought to render thanks and praise to the Lord for giving the area its very first secondary school students. It was also a service at which, for the sake of the area, opportunity must be seized to try and inspire the youth of Chitheba to set high and noble goals for themselves, so that the area might produce more and more educated people. Thus old Kadazi decided he will ask Tomasi and Mapopa to address the congregation at the end of the service, as that would certainly inspire Chitheba's youngsters to emulate those two pioneers in the area's higher education.

When he got up the following morning, the old man had his sermon all ready in his mind. All that remained was to

read through the scripture texts he had chosen and then pick three hymns out of the six that had come to his mind during the night. And so, after giving his old pith helmet the usual Sunday morning fresh coating of white chalk paste, he took his bible and hymn book, picked up a stool and, retiring to a corner of the veranda where he could not be distracted by old Thetisa as she bustled about with domestic chores, he settled down to putting finishing touches to his preparation for the service

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When old Kadazi and his wife Thetisa reached the church, they found they had been preceded by a sizeable number of the faithful. The women were already inside the long baked-brick and grass-thatched block, there being no place outside where they could sit sheltered from the hot December sun, which was almost overhead in the cloudless sky. A few men, mainly those older, were also inside the building; but most of them were standing in little groups in the narrow shade under the church's eaves, leaning against the wall as they chatted, their bibles and hymn books placed on the sills of the shutter-less windows. The young men stood in their own group a couple of windows away from the cluster of the men's groups. And around the window opposite where the young men were standing, a group of girls chattered away, now and then letting out half-suppressed giggles.

Old Kadazi having arrived, the church elders could now retire to the vestry, where they were to discuss announcements to be made to the congregation. They were

also, as was their custom at this church, to appoint one among themselves to preach the Word.

When the elders had gathered, old Kadazi, who was presiding, told them he had taken the liberty to give himself the responsibility of conducting the service and preaching the Word. Many an elder inwardly sighed with relief at the announcement, for although every Sunday each church elder was expected to be ready to preach the Word at short notice, it was nevertheless rather unsettling to be assigned the task only minutes before the beginning of the service.

“Before we turn to announcements, I have a suggestion to put before you,” old Kadazi said. He began by recalling how Chitheba had for long suffered the humiliation of having no secondary school student, when year after year all the neighbouring areas had been sending more and more of their sons and daughters to secondary schools. Then he spoke at length on the need for Chitheba to have educated people, expressing concern that some parents didn’t want their children to pursue their education beyond Standard 8. Too many of Chitheba’s daughters were being encouraged to drop out of school so that they might get married; and too many of the area’s sons were being lured by the beer calabash.

“I therefore suggest that we should parade our two pioneer secondary school students before the congregation today,” said the old man in conclusion. “Let us have the two lads speak to the congregation at the end of the service about secondary education – what they learn there and what

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secondary school life is like in general. That way Tomasi and Mapopa might get both their fellow young people and the parents in our area to appreciate not only the value of secondary education, but also its glory.”

All but two of the elders contributed enthusiastically to the topic raised by old Kadazi. Not only did they all accept the old man’s suggestion, but they also sought to outdo each other in elaborating on the salient points raised in his speech. The two who refrained from saying anything were Nyalupeska and Mugona, the latter being the younger brother of Kapopo, Mapopa’s non-Christian father. These two limited their participation in the proceedings to mere nods of assent or affirmative grunts whenever someone made a statement with which they agreed. But it was obvious they did not object to having Tomasi and Mapopa speak at the end of the service.

The two lads were therefore summoned to the vestry. Without much hesitation, they agreed to address the congregation.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Old Kadazi's sermon and the hymns he had selected centred on the theme of making one's life significant. He based his lesson on the last chapter of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, in which the writer concentrates on giving advice to the youth. Thus it was a message exclusively tailored for the young people in the congregation; in fact, it almost degenerated into a direct call on the youth of Chitheba to emulate Tomasi and Mapopa if they were to make their lives significant to themselves and to their area, and thereby to God.

When the old man finally summoned the congregation to stand and sing the closing hymn, Tomasi's heart begun to pound furiously against his rib cage: It had suddenly occurred to him that Mapopa, who it had been agreed would speak first, might say the things he, Tomasi was planning to say; for they hadn't discussed who was to say what. Fortunately, although he might 'steal' many of the points Tomasi was planning to cover in his talk, Mapopa was, of course, not likely to even touch on what Tomasi had chosen to be his principal topic – superstition.

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Tomasi had decided to tell the congregation how secondary school biology, geography and physical science had already taught him the fallacy of such superstitions as believing that mumps could be cured by the patient dancing at an intersection of footpaths while balancing a bundle of twigs on the head; that first-borns had the power to hold up rain merely by carrying a few grains of river sand tied up in some cloth; and that certain people had the power to send a bolt of lightning to strike anybody they wish dead.

Old Kadazi's introductory remarks before calling upon the two boys to speak to the congregation glowed with pride – both personal pride as well as pride on behalf of Chitheba. He made much of his having been the boys' first teacher: "*Asambizgi*" (teacher), he said, addressing headmaster Hara, who had come to Chitheba three years after the old man's retirement, "that blackwall over there – that is where I taught them reading, writing and arithmetic." The blackwall to which he was referring was at the far end of the church building. It was one of the three black-walls in the building, which still functioned as a classroom block on weekends when school was in session. "On this special day for us here at Chitheba," he told the congregation, "the first day for our pioneer secondary school students to be in our midst as a gathering of people from all corners of Chitheba, we felt we should ask Tomasi and Mapopa to tell us about secondary school – what they learn there and what secondary school life is like in general."

Just as Tomasi had been fearing he might, Mapopa talked

about nearly all the points he, Tomasi, had planned to deal with. He spoke about the subjects they were taught, about clubs, about their white teachers and how at first he had found it difficult to understand their English, and about homesickness. To the delight of the congregation, he was particularly graphic in what he said concerning homesickness: He spoke of the joy he and Mapopa had experienced the previous day upon nearing each landmark that had brought them nearer and nearer home: Hora mountain, Kasitu river, Muzasi hills, the grocery stores, Chitheba Primary School, and, in his case, Mutanthambwe mountain to the east of the school, which intervened between the school and his village on the western bank of Kasuntha stream.

Although he wished that Mapopa had left one or two points for him, Tomasi was glad that his friend had mentioned the subjects they were taught at school: That provided a fitting introduction to his talk. He planned to say to the congregation that he thought he should tell them more about the subjects mentioned by his friend, and then from there go smoothly into his pet topic – superstition.

However, something forced him to suddenly change his topic immediately he stepped onto the dais after Mapopa was through with his talk. He had just given the appropriate salutations – “My parents, brothers and sisters, and my fellow young people” – when his attention was drawn to his mother. Her legs stretched before her, Nyalupeska was sitting with other women on the packed-earth floor, which

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late the day before had been made ready for the service by being thoroughly smeared with a thin layer of liquefied cow dung. Looking at her over the heads of people seated on benches immediately before him, Tomasi took note of the satisfied tilt of her head and the proud glow on her face as she waited for what he was certain she regarded as the climax of that glorious day. It was clear to Tomasi that she considered the next few moments to be a kind of reward for all the difficulties she had gone through in order to educate him. To disappoint her now would therefore be insensitive and ungrateful. And Tomasi knew that not only would he disappoint her if he were to publicly state that education had taught him to reject superstitious witchcraft, but that he would also cause her to greatly fear for him. Rather than thus ruin what was no doubt the greatest day in his devoted mother's life so far, he decided to quickly think of something else to say to the congregation.

"My friend has said all there is to say about secondary school life; so what I'm going to say does not directly concern what we've been asked to talk about," he found himself saying. "On behalf of my fellow young people," he went on, "I would like to remind our parents that before one can be selected for secondary education, one must pass examinations. And to pass examinations, one must be well prepared for them. But it seems some parents here in Chitheba do not want their children to prepare for examinations. I remember last year, as the Primary School Leaving Examinations approached, our teachers used to

give extra classes on Saturday mornings for interested pupils. Very few of us attended these classes. Many of my friends said the reason they didn't attend was that their parents were ordering them to look after cattle instead. Who knows, perhaps if these friends of mine had been attending those classes they too would have been selected."

This observation, though made on the spur of the moment, was generally very well received by the congregation. In particular, it drew a chorus of approving grunts from Tomasi's age-mates. And also he thought he had seen his mother nod in agreement.

Encouraged by this general acceptance of his impromptu remarks, and at the same time anxious to stretch his talk to a respectable duration, Tomasi decided to make one more observation on behalf of his generation.

"Another thing is that some of our parents do not really encourage us by their example," he said, confident in the knowledge that he now commanded his audience's total attention. "Many young people from this area have been attracted away from school by the joys of beer parties in our villages...." A brief ripple of laughter passed through the congregation at this, encouraging Tomasi to conclude on an even more humorous note: "Yes, beer has become such an attraction in our villages that it is by sheer luck that some of us have so far managed to escape the influence of our carousing grandparents, if not our very parents!" With that, he stepped down from the dais as the congregation, laughing appreciatively at his concluding words, clapped for him.

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Tomasi was pleasantly surprised at the way his improvised talk had been received. He was also glad that he had been able, at such short notice, to avoid causing his mother undue misery. However, he and Nyalupeska were to discover later that very day how dearly that improvisation was to cost them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

While Tomasi was walking home that afternoon, still basking in the success of his impromptu talk to the congregation, one church member was having angry thoughts over that same talk as he approached his farmstead three kilometres from the church in the opposite direction. Mkwanaazi had been particularly annoyed by that part of Tomasi's talk involving parents who the previous year had prevented their Standard 8 sons from attending extra classes on Saturday mornings. He was hurt because he felt Tomasi had by default lumped him with those parents who had had no reason to keep their sons away from the classes. And yet he had personally explained his predicament to headmaster Hara when the latter had confronted him over his son Thula not attending the classes. He had told the headmaster that as he and Thula were the only males in the household, his farm work got very disrupted during weekdays when Thula was at school. On these days the only real chance Mkwanaazi had to cultivate his maize field was between just before sunrise and mid-

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morning, for thereafter he had to drive his six head of cattle to distant pastures, returning them to their kraal not long before sunset. Saturday, therefore, was the only day he could put in a full day of farm work, he had told Hara. Thus he now wondered why the headmaster, who he was certain had, in the interest of education, briefed the boy on what to say to the congregation, had not instructed Tomasi to mention him in his talk as one parent who just could not have afforded to let his son attend classes on Saturdays. Mkwanzazi felt it was particularly fair that this ought to have been said of him because he had been in the congregation during Tomasi's talk. In fact, among the parents who were being condemned for this anti-education practice, he was the only church-goer, the rest being non-Christians. Indeed for a moment after the service, Mkwanzazi had debated with himself whether to confront Hara and demand an explanation. But, being a man who found no attraction in disputes of any kind, he had decided to endure the humiliation in silence.

Such then were Mkwanzazi's bitter thoughts when he met old Panji just outside the former's maize field, which spread on either side of Chitheba's central footpath.

"Baba, Manda!" Mkwanzazi respectfully saluted the elderly man, who was old enough to be his father, Mkwanzazi being an age-mate of old Panji's first-born – late Kajanike.

"How fortunate to have met you, my son!" said the old man, his voice – already shaky with age – almost inaudibly thin with the exhaustion of climbing Muzasi hills hardly half

a kilometre away. "I am terribly dry." He began to direct his weary steps towards the leafy shade of a wayside katope tree.

"Don't even mention it, Gogo Manda," Mkwanazi said regretfully. "Snuff – who sees it these days?" Notwithstanding what he was saying, he was already squatting under the katope tree, fishing out his snuff container from the inside pocket of his snuff-scented khaki jacket as he waited for the old man to take up his place beside him in the shade. "There is nothing in here, absolutely nothing," he added as he rapped his opaque Vicks-jar snuff container against his thigh.

"It is the worst snuff famine we have known for years," old Panji observed as he squatted with a groan beside Mkwanazi. "One wonders where it is taking us. Even at Kasindi village, where I am coming from, they are all starving." Then, dropping his voice to a begging whisper, he asked: "Perhaps you have a roll of cured tobacco, my son?"

"Not even a bit of a leaf, Gogo Manda," Mkwanazi replied with a sad chuckle. "If you had asked me a week ago, I would have been in a position to give you something. At that time I still had the crumbs of a small roll I brought from my in-law at Maguzu last month. They are not as badly hit by this snuff famine over there as we are here. In fact, I am planning to go there again any time now, before the task of weeding begins in earnest."

"*Eeeyaa*, my son; you have really saved me," old Panji said with deep gratitude as he stretched forth his left palm to

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meet Mkwanzazi's left hand, in which a generous helping of snuff was cupped. "All my suffering is gone now; it was sheer torture climbing the hills without anything in the nose," he said with a tearful groan after having hungrily drawn three deep sniffs into each nostril. "I will not even feel the remaining distance now." His voice choked by the tear-provoking snuff, he sounded as if he were in a room full of smoke.

As he dwelt on the flavour of the snuff, savouring it by making soft clucking noises at the back of his nasal cavity while exhaling through the nose, old Panji decided that the snuff's superior quality was more due to the expert curing of the tobacco from which it was ground than to the amount of *magari* ash added to it during the grinding to enhance its favour. Surely Mkwanzazi still had some of this excellent tobacco, notwithstanding what he had said about having finished the crumbs last week? He decided that after they had chatted a while he would again bring up his request for a cut of tobacco.

"How are you then, Gogo Manda?" Mkwanzazi asked when it suddenly occurred to him that they had not yet enquired after each other's health.

"Rheumatism, my son," the old man replied forlornly. "It appears this uncertain health of mine will not give me a chance to cultivate this year. Anyhow, what about you, my son: How are you?"

"I am well, Gogo. A pity about your rheumatism. This is hardly the time for the body to let us down: The sprouts

in the field will soon be needing our utmost attention. A groaning body is hardly up to the onerous task of weeding."

After old Panji had acknowledged Mkwanzazi's commiseration by one or two observations in agreement with what the latter had expressed, Mkwanzazi enquired about the old man's errand to Kasindi village.

"I went to get these *nyifi* seeds from my friend Vyalema," old Panji told him, pointing to an ear of sweet sorghum lying on the ground beside him, thickly clustered with the dark-brown seeds. "He has a very sweet and juicy variety. I tasted some of it last year and liked it so much that I asked him to preserve a few seeds for me."

Mkwanzazi would never cease to be amazed at old Panji's stamina when it came to farm work. The man was completely grey and bent over with age; yet he was very devoted to the cultivation of the soil. In the dry season, when ordinarily there was no farm work to speak of, he kept himself busy with digging up stumps in his fields, a virtually unnecessary activity for a small-scale subsistence farmer whose tilling tool was neither the tractor nor the ox-drawn plough, but simply the hand hoe. It was merely his way of ensuring that he worked the soil season in and season out. And only the beer drink could keep him away from this otherwise quite pointless dry-season task.

Thinking thus of the old man's weakness for the beer calabash brought back to Mkwanzazi's mind the remark with which Tomasi had concluded his talk in church earlier that day. And, perhaps because he had been reflecting rather

bitterly on the boy's talk just before meeting old Panji, Mkwanzazi acted on impulse and asked the old man: "Is it true what your grandson says: that you have been trying to influence him to drink beer?"

"Tomasi says that?" old Panji asked in a sore, incredulous voice, his right hand poised before his left nostril, a pinch of snuff between its thumb and forefinger. He didn't need to be told that Mkwanzazi was referring to Tomasi, since all his grown grandsons – Kaswaya (Julizga's first-born), Munyanji (Gwaza's first-born) and Jalani (Tomasi's elder brother) – were already drinkers. Also, apart from Tomasi, none of his younger grandsons would engage in the mischief of lying against him in this way. "Did he tell you that? What exactly did he tell you?" He hastily drew in the remaining sniffs, rubbed his hands against the legs of his much-patched green trousers to get them clean of extra snuff, and then regarded Mkwanzazi expectantly.

Seeing how sore the old man had become at his question, Mkwanzazi regretted having introduced the matter – at any rate he wished he had gone about it a little more tactfully. However, there was now no choice but to give a full account of what had happened at church.

"Perhaps, Gogo Manda, the boy did not mean it quite the way I put it in my question just now," Mkwanzazi suggested in a placating tone after recounting everything. "He probably –"

"No, my son," old Panji cut in, his voice pregnantly calm and his right hand stretched forth to check Mkwanzazi. "You

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don't know Tomasi. I know him well; after all, he is my grandson... I think I should be going now. Stay well, my son." With that, he reached for his *nyifi* ear and his long walking stick. All thoughts of asking for a cut of Mkwanzazi's excellent tobacco completely forgotten, he painfully rose to his aged feet and shuffled off.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tomasi was just entering the village compound when a clamour of cows mooing and calves blaring arose in the direction of the cattle kraal. His cousins Kondwani and Chiza were bringing the cattle home from the pastures – much to the relief of the two hungry young calves which had spent the long hours since mid-morning shut up in their pen within the kraal. The calves, both only two weeks old, were the latest additions to old Panji's herd. Tomasi had found it quite a thrill milking their mothers before going to church that morning, after three months of not even seeing a cow's teats. He must now go over to the kraal again and join the boys for the evening milking.

Having changed into casual clothes, Tomasi was already in the kraal when Chiza, who had run to the village compound to fetch a *sefuliya*, returned with the aluminium cooking pot. One of the desperately thirsty calves was then let out of the pen and it voraciously attacked its mother's swollen udder while Tomasi proceeded to tie together by the

hocks the cow's hind-quarters with a mupapa-bark lasso.

The precaution of tying up the cow seemed hardly necessary in view of the animal's initial docility as her young sucked away. But that docility vanished when, after the calf had sucked sufficiently to prime the teats, Kondwani pulled it away from the udder and held it captive by thrusting the palm of his right hand crosswise between its toothless jaws and grasping its right fore leg with his left hand. As the young animal thrashed about in protest, the cow made a couple of attempts to act in sympathy with her young; but the lasso dug into her hocks, forcing her to remain still. Tomasi, squatting before the udder while Chiza held the *sefuliya* for him, proceeded to milk her.

Presently, the cow dropped dung. Acting instinctively, Tomasi promptly aimed a teat and squirted some milk onto the steaming droppings as he muttered: "*Vyako ivyo*" (that's your business); then, expressing milk out of the same teat into the *sefuliya*, he said, "*Vithu ivi; utipengeko vinandi*" (this is what we're interested in: give us plenty of it).

Suddenly, Tomasi felt rather uncomfortable at the conviction with which he had performed that little ritual. He admitted to himself that he had actually been annoyed with the cow the moment the dung came, believing with everybody else that cows deliberately drop dung when they want to stop the flow of their milk. He had then performed the ritual completely convinced it would prevent the dung from having any effect on the milk flow. For a moment, however, he was somewhat puzzled by his discomfort at the

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whole thing. He had always performed this ritual. So why feel guilty about it today? After a little thought, he found the explanation: That was the first time he had performed the act ever since he had allowed his mother to put the so-called luck charm powder in his blood. Inwardly laughing at himself, he resolved never again to catch himself paying any attention whatsoever to this dung nonsense. Just as he totally refused to believe in the useless powder with which his mother had merely polluted his blood, he would equally reject any unscientific ideas, and totally refrain from any act associated with such ideas.

It was nearly sunset when Kondwani and Chiza brought the milk porridge to Tomasi's hut. Tomasi was sitting outside, reading in the dying sunshine. The porridge of finger-millet flour was still in the pot in which the boy's had cooked it. They had cooked it to their favourite thickness – so thick that as they and Tomasi ate it, their gourd-rind spoons threatened to break.

Tomasi and his cousins were halfway through their snack when old Panji entered the village compound. Reaching Tomasi's hut, which was on the way to his hovel further up the compound, the old man suddenly began to shout furiously as he shuffled towards the boys: "You child: You are the most contemptible child that was ever born in this village. A disrespectful liar against your own parents! So that is what education can do – turn children into such rotten liars, eh?"

Realizing that he was the target of this blistering verbal

attack, Tomasi jumped to his feet, licking his gourd spoon and laughing nervously as he backed away from his irate grandfather.

“What have I done, *a-mdala?*” he asked as old Panji, brandishing his walking stick, advanced on him.

“What have I done?” the fuming old man mimicked grimly, stopping in his tracks upon realising the futility of chasing an agile youngster. “I want you and your mother to come and tell me right now why you lied against me in church today, you thoroughly spoilt child!” he bellowed. Then he started for his hut, raging against Tomasi’s supposedly scandalous behaviour as he hobbled along.

Regretting having made the joke about carousing grandparents at the end of his talk to the congregation, Tomasi walked weakly to his mother’s kitchen hut, where Nyalupeska had been pottering about with chores relating to the evening meal. It was immediately obvious when he got to the hut that his mother had heard for herself her father-in-law’s outburst. Nyalupeska was sitting by the hut’s doorway, looking quite dejected as she stared at the floor, her right hand supporting her head as if she had a distressing toothache. A little further inside the hut, a few shelled groundnuts in a plate beside a heap of unshelled ones bore silent testimony to a chore interrupted by old Panji’s verbal storm. Thus Tomasi could see he didn’t need to tell her about the old man’s urgent summons.

“Mother, I’m sure he’s referring to that joking remark I made at the end of my talk,” he said with downcast eyes

after squatting down on the opposite side of the doorway. "Actually, I didn't mean to make any such joke; I just found myself saying it," he added rather lamely.

"Obviously that is the remark someone has told him about," Nyalupeska said quietly, still studying the floor. "But you did not talk about any specific grandparent trying to influence his grandson to drink. No doubt someone has deliberately misquoted you, with the evil intent of poisoning your grandfather's mind against you. But *who* could have done such a thing?" She knitted her brow in pained bewilderment.

At this point an equally worried Gogo Chemeni staggered into the hut and asked Nyalupeska what was going on. After her daughter-in-law had recounted what had happened at church, the old lady shook her head disapprovingly. "*Chinthu chichoko chemeni?*" (a very small matter this), she declared, characteristically mispronouncing the word *chomeni* (very), a mannerism that had earned her the nick-name Chemeni, which had become so widely accepted as to completely replace her surname, Nyangwira. "Needless to say, a *chijunisonganya* has been at work. But why should *a-mdala* believe the words of a gossip whose sole aim is to cause discord among other people? I shall come with you to his hut; he should be made to see the wisdom of giving his grandson the benefit of the doubt in such situations."

"No, mother, let me handle this," Nyalupeska said. "Your involvement might only complicate things further."

But when Nyalupeska and Tomasi went over to old Panji's hut, the old man demanded that Gogo Chemeni be also present.

"What do you mean it was only a joke?" the old man asked Nyalupeska in an uncompromising tone after she had narrated what Tomasi had said in church.

"But surely, *a-mdala*," Gogo Chemeni intervened, her tone chiding rather than pleading, "can you not see that whoever told you about this whole thing is a *chiyunisonganya*? What other motive could he have had in telling you except to bring about misunderstanding in this village? Who told you about it, anyway?"

"There is no need to tell you who told me!" the old man barked at his wife. "It is enough to say that he is a Christian who was in church when this contemptible child told his shameless lie against me."

"But *a-mdala*, you haven't tried to influence me to drink beer, have you?" Tomasi asked. "You haven't. So how can I say something that you —?"

"Shut up, child!" the old man shouted, almost leaping at Tomasi from the ancient wooden bed on which he was sitting. "Don't try to practise your cleverness on me! If this is what education does to children..." He broke off to lean over and scrape from the dirt floor a pinch of dust which, straightening up again, he rubbed across his wrinkled throat with solemn flourish while saying: "...then I hereby swear that the day I will in any way help you with your education my departed father Musa shall rise from his grave!"

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“E!E!E!” Gogo Chemeni grunted in horror at her husband’s terribly binding oath. “How can you utter such an oath against your own grandson, *a-mdala*?”

“He would respect me if he realised that I am his grandfather.” With that, old Panji tottered to his feet and shuffled out of the hut, much to the shock of Gogo Chemeni and Nyalupeska, who could only shake their heads uncomprehendingly. As for Tomasi, he just sat there, head drooped with regret at the distress this sudden turn of events was causing his mother.

When the three awkwardly emerged from old Panji’s hut the old man was mumbling his way to the cattle kraal to see how his new calves were getting on.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was a despondent Tomasi that returned to school at the beginning of the second term of his first year. The implications of his grandfather's oath, which his unsuperstitious mind had failed to grasp at the time the oath was uttered, were later fully explained to him by his mother. Thus he had now lost all the hope he had dared nurse that old Panji might some day come to his assistance despite the old man's attitude to members of Gogo Chemeni's household. The future of his education now looked dimmer than ever. True, there was his uncle Julizga, the only other man of means in the village. But the same unfriendly relationship between Gogo Chemeni's household and that of her late co-wife Gogo Nyamumba made it rather idle to expect Julizga to sell any of his cattle or goats in order to help with his education.

Troubled by these gloomy thoughts about his education, Tomasi was pensive and rather withdrawn throughout that term. Miss Woodcock had noticed this change in her

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student's mood from the very beginning of the term. At first she had thought it was due to James Mwenefumbo's failure to return to school that term. Tomasi had confessed to her his acute disappointment upon learning that his best friend had written the headmaster to say he was unable to return to school, as his mother had failed to find the fees. But then no sooner had the new term started in January than Tomasi had become firm friends with Leonard Sibande, a fellow Form 1 student who was just as lively, eloquent in English, bookish and full of day-dreams about the future as James had been. And now, several weeks into the term, upon concluding that his friendship with Leonard had hardly improved Tomasi's mood, Miss Woodcock decided to find out what the trouble was.

"Something seems to be the matter, Tomasi," she said to him one Thursday evening after he had just finished giving her the Chitumbuka lesson for the day. "You haven't quite been yourself since the beginning of this term. Surely it's still not because of James?"

Tomasi, who certainly hadn't been unaware of his rather low spirits over the past weeks, knew straight away what his teacher was talking about. "Not really," he replied with downcast eyes.

"What is it, then? Would you like to tell me about it?"

"It's my education, madam. I'm very worried about it. I don't think I'll be able to go very far with it."

Tomasi suddenly regretted having told Miss Woodcock that much. What he had just said, he reasoned, could only

make his teacher more curious about his situation. He just couldn't see how he could deal with her inevitable questions without revealing that he had a family background that was bedevilled by disunity and oppressed by superstitions like oath-uttering. There was really no need to put before his teacher such embarrassing details about his background.

"What makes you think that?" Miss Woodcock asked rather anxiously.

"Nothing specifically," he lied, a ring of sudden casualness in his voice. "It's just the feeling I get somehow."

Miss Woodcock's feminine instincts told her that Tomasi was having second thoughts about something he had initially decided to share with her: The sudden casualness of his tone reflected an obvious effort to undo the seriousness with which he had introduced the matter. Not wishing to impose on him a discussion he had obviously changed his mind about, she decided to drop the issue without a further word. Instead she asked him if he would like a cup of tea. Tomasi declined the offer, explaining – after glancing at Miss Woodcock's clock sitting on the mantelpiece – that he wished to borrow a book from the library before it closed in the next fifteen minutes.

As he ran to the library at the opposite end of the campus, Tomasi was relieved that Miss Woodcock had decided not to pursue that potentially embarrassing topic. Two terms later, however, he would have cause to recall the aborted discussion.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the meantime, any residual hope Tomasi might have entertained that he would continue with school beyond Form 1 got rudely shaken one April evening. He was back in Chitheba for his second holiday in his first academic year when, early on a Monday morning, his mother made a desperate decision. During the night, Nyalupeska had thought long and hard about the prospects of her son's education. They were far from bright: When Tomasi would return to school at the end of the holidays to do his final term that year, he was going to take with him the very last tambala of the money from which she had been drawing his school fees each term. Thereafter the small tin tucked away at the bottom of the family trunk would for the first time be empty. And that was the worrying thought; for an empty tin down there meant a sure end to Tomasi's education, something she could hardly live with. The situation was made even more hopeless by the fact that borrowing money was now out of the question, for, as everyone in Chitheba knew, she no longer

had the means to pay back a loan. What was she to do?

Her brother-in-law Julizga had hardly crossed Nyalupeska's mind as she had agonised over the future of her son's education during the night. But when she woke up the next morning she found herself suddenly charged with undaunted determination to brave it and seek the man's assistance. She was, of course, only too aware that she did not stand much of a chance with him; nevertheless, she had to approach him – he was her last hope. And, never a procrastinator when it came to her son's education, she decided to see him right away – after his return that evening from the day-long task of guarding his maize and millet fields at the foot of Mafwewu mountain against marauding monkeys.

In the early evening, after having kept alert since sunset for Julizga's return from his fields, Nyalupeska finally heard the man's characteristic merry whistling as he passed through the maize behind her yard on his way to his house at the western end of the village compound. Allowing him enough time to reach his house, but anxious not to delay too much for fear she might find he had proceeded to join his fellow men for their evening fellowship in old Panji's hut, she suspended her kitchen chores and made her way in the twilight to Julizga's yard.

"Odi!" she called out as she sat down on the raised packed-earth veranda of Julizga's main house.

"Odini!" Julizga's wife Nyakanyasko called back in reply from the fireside in her kitchen hut, where she was busy

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preparing relish for the evening meal. She then emerged from the hut, padded the few metres to the main house and sat respectfully beside the older woman.

After the two ladies had exchanged greetings in the leisurely and elaborate fashion of easy-going rural folk, Nyalupeska told Nyakanyasko that it was really father-of-Kondwani she had come to see. Whereupon the younger woman rose and re-entered her kitchen hut, where her husband was having a few drags at his roll-your-own cigarette before he would go and join his fellow men in the *mphala*. Before long, Julizga was squatting a couple of metres from Nyalupeska

“I came to have a few words with you, Manda,” Nyalupeska began rather hesitantly after the usual leisurely greetings had led them into several minutes of discussion about the hopeless crop situation in their part of Chitheba. Crops in that part of the area were so poor that season that it was a foregone conclusion the area was going to be hit by famine on a scale never before experienced there. For a reason which nobody could even begin to guess, that year’s rains had been very erratic in the northern half of Chitheba. The whole of Chitheba had received such excellent rains at the beginning of the season that everybody had confidently predicted as bountiful a harvest as the previous year’s. But just before the beginning of the second weeding period, the weather had begun to behave in an extremely curious manner: Each time Chitheba became shrouded by promising rain clouds only the southern half of the area

would receive the rain, while northern Chitheba went dry, or at best got only light showers. The pattern was so regular that, thoroughly baffled, the villagers of northern Chitheba superstitiously attributed the bizarre situation to the presence of nesting crows in their area – for it was believed that it never rained in an area where there were crows' eggs. In fact, although they knew very well that these birds were not in the habit of nesting during the rainy season, the desperate people of this afflicted part of Chitheba nevertheless went to the extent of organising search-and-destroy expeditions for crows' eggs that might possibly be present in the area. Of course the expeditions drew a blank. And yet the drought condition persisted in the area; so that by March it had done irreparable damage to maize and all the other crops. Right now, as Nyalupeska held that discussion with Julizga, the devastation in the fields was such that even if the rains were to suddenly improve, they could do nothing to the badly stunted and mostly cob-less maize plants. The other crops were equally beyond saving.

Julizga coughed long and hard before responding after Nyalupeska had eventually explained why she had called on him. It was one of those almost habitual coughing fits one could count on Julizga going into during a smoking bout. Anyway, again as was his habit before responding to a request of some importance, he briefly summarised for Nyalupeska what she had said prior to making her request for assistance. Then, throwing away his cigarette stub onto the sandy yard before him, he said in his mellow bass: "To

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be sure, Lupeska, it is quite in order to approach other people when one is in need of assistance. If people have the means to help, one certainly gets assisted..." He paused to let out a brief burst of his trademark coughing, an act which Nyalupeska interpreted as calculated to allow her time to consider his last statement. "As for your request, Lupeska," he continued, "one regrets that too many problems have descended on us at one and the same time. The three head of cattle and the six goats you have alluded to are certainly there; and they are indeed there to be made use of in time of need. But one has only to look at the fields to realise that by next year's harvest people like me will not have a single beast to their name. This year, Lupeska, our grain in this unlucky part of Chitheba is not in our fields; it is in our livestock kraals. The truth is that by next year's harvest every village in that other part of Chitheba, even the smallest hamlet that has never known the aroma of cattle dung, will have a kraal; while many kraals over here will be depleted, some closed altogether."

Of course Nyalupeska had not expected Julizga to eagerly come to her son's assistance; but the plea the man had given was the last thing she would have imagined him to use as an excuse for refusing to help Tomasi. That Musa village would that year be in the grip of the worst famine in living memory was only too clear. But surely Julizga knew that old Panji was not going to hold on to his one dozen cattle while watching his people starve? She now asked him if he really thought the old man would not help his

(Julizga's) family as well as the other families in the village during the impending famine by bartering one of his animals for maize.

"You know very well the danger of counting on another person's generosity," was all Julizga could say in reply. And his voice had an unmistakable tone of finality to it – a tone that seems to tell Nyalupeska "That's all there is to it".

There wasn't much else that Nyalupeska, being the beggar, could say to Julizga in response. She had expected as much. Anyway, at least she had tried.

And so both old Panji and Julizga, the only men of means in the entire village, were not prepared to help with her son's education. The future looked bleaker than ever before. So Nyalupeska decided to meet with her two sons in order to put before them the way things stood at that point.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

““Mother should not know about this,” Nyalupeska told her two sons at the mini meeting she convened in her kitchen hut a few hours later that evening. She was referring to what she had just reported to Jalani and Tomasi, namely that Julizga had refused to help with Tomasi’s school fees. “You know how emotional she has become over *a-mdala*’s attitude toward Tomasi’s education. It would only increase her bitterness if she found out that father-of-Kondwani has the same attitude.”

“But she already knows it,” Jalani pointed out with a mirthless chuckle.

“So she does. But she does not as yet know that father-of-Kondwani has been approached and has actually refused to help. Certainly I would not want her to know it just now, when she and *a-mdala* have just had a quarrel over Tomasi.”

The quarrel Nyalupeska was referring to had occurred a day after Tomasi’s arrival in the village for his current

holidays. Gogo Chemeni had approached her husband first thing that morning with a passionate plea that old Panji reconcile with Tomasi over the grave oath the old man had uttered against his grandson. She had begged the old man to agree to the preparation of the *mphamba* herbal concoction for him and Tomasi to ritually drink so as to undo the dire potential effects of the terrible oath. But the old man had dismissed the whole idea, despite being fully aware that the result of breaking such an oath, knowingly or unknowingly, was the death (from excruciating boils covering the whole body) of either or both of those affected by the oath.

“In any case, do you think your so-called educated grandson would have anything to do with *mphamba* drinking?” the old man had asked his wife with a sneer. “Then you do not know that child. Learning had blinded that grandchild of yours so much that he considers the ways of his people as sheer foolishness.”

At that, all Gogo Chemeni’s past frustrations had welled up in her and, pushing aside all self-control, she had blurted out, “That is only an excuse, *a-mdala!* How can you take a mere child like him so seriously? Just say it openly that you are not prepared to help anybody in my household!”

A shouting match between the two had then followed, so that by the time Gogo Chemeni had grumbled her way back to her house quite a few people in the village had heard the quarrel for themselves.

“But she will know soon enough, mother,” Jalani insisted, and then quickly got back to the main issue of the

three-people meeting. "I must admit that I never had your faith in uncle Julizga, mother. In fact, I have never deceived myself that anybody in this village would ever want to help us with the education of Tomasi. The truth is that, by being so quick to express his book learning on various issues, your son has managed to make many people in this village resent his education. That, I am sure, explains things like *a-mdala's* oath against him. Obviously that oath was uttered merely to make more firm a decision your father-in-law had already made – never to contribute anything to the type of education your son is displaying in this village. Oh yes, mother, the burden to educate Tomasi will always be ours alone, for there is no sign that your son will ever change. Only yesterday he was again about to incur the anger of the *madoda* in the *mphala* by disagreeing with the fact that crows eggs cause drought. Fortunately, he did not go too far: Since he was sitting near me, I was able to pinch him as a warning that he should not go any farther after he had said something I knew would lead him to his usual foolishness."

"Tomasi, my child, why do you do this to me?" Nyalupeska said in a tone of despair as she looked towards her *nkhwangu*, who was sitting on the other side of the fireplace. "Do you not know that when you make people resent you, you also make them resent me as your mother? Why can you not keep what you learn from books to yourself?"

Tomasi, staring at the floor through the dim glow of the smouldering fire, chose not to say anything, though he

wanted so much to tell his mother and brother that he couldn't keep his scientific knowledge to himself because he believed it was important for everyone to know that superstition was unreasonable. He would so much have liked to remind them, for example, how the so-called luck charm his mother had put in his blood was failing to influence old Panji and Julizga to help him. But, deciding that it had already been an emotional enough evening for his mother, he held his peace.

Jalani broke the silence created by Tomasi's decision not to reply to what Nyalupeska had said, a silence which he mistook for admission of guilt on the part of his younger brother. "Anyway, mother," he said, "despite the way your son is using it at present, his education is important to our family. Though no one help us, we will see to it that he completes it. It is our responsibility and ours alone. We will just have to shoulder it."

The determination in Jalani's words stirred but little hope in Tomasi. He just couldn't see how his mother and Jalani would ever make it without external help, especially since all the three terms of his second academic year were going to stretch over a period during which Chitheba would be in the grip of severe famine. In a year of plenty, his mother and Jalani could have counted on taking beans, groundnuts and maize flour to Mzuzu to sell at the produce market there. In fact, his mother had managed to put him through the last two years of primary school by this very method of head-loading produce to the market at Mzuzu, some fifty

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kilometres to the northeast of Chitheba. But the harvest was going to be so meagre the coming year that there would be nothing to sell. So, as he walked to his hut later in the night, he was so dismayed that he decided he might as well tell headmaster Sakala at the end of the following term that he wasn't even going to bother to return to school for the second academic year.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

When Tomasi returned to school for the last term that academic year, however, something quite unexpected gave him reason not to altogether give up hope of returning to school the following academic year. Miss Briggs, who was due to return to the United States in a few months following completion of her term as a Peace Corps volunteer, had received a letter from her fiancé back in the States. Enclosed with the letter was a printed circular which her fiancé, a former Peace Corps teacher in Nigeria and Kenya now turned author, asked her to put on the school's notice board. The circular read, in part:

Howard K. Price, a well-known American writer who for many years taught English in secondary schools in West and East Africa, is preparing to publish a collection of animal folktales from all over Africa. To gather some of the material for the book, the author has organised a competition for twelve secondary schools throughout Africa.

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Your school is one of those chosen....

Then the circular went on to say that the competition was open only to students. The author of each successful entry would be paid US \$150, regardless of the length of his or her entry. Authors of successful entries should expect to receive their prizes within two months after the competition's closing date...

Six William Koyi students, Tomasi among them, decided to take part in the competition. As the deadline was only two months away, they went to work on their folktales right away.

Tomasi put his very best into writing his three entries. One folktale featured Hare and Hyena, another was about Hare and Jackal, and the third tale was about Hare and Tortoise.

It was Tomasi's earnest prayer that at least one of his entries might be selected. The prize money for just one of them would be enough for a whole academic year's fees; so that if one of his entries succeeded, he would be able to continue with school through the second year, which meant he would leave school with a Junior Certificate. Although the JC certificate could not exactly help him realise his number one ambition – to become another 'Britain' (his headmaster) – it might at least enable him to get a decent job.

Thus Tomasi's first academic year closed on a hopeful note, and he dared to be confident about the future as he went home for his holidays in August. His friend Mapopa

(who had chosen not to participate in the competition) had helped feed this feeling of confidence in Tomasi. Having read all the three of them, Mapopa had liked Tomasi's folktales so much that for the remainder of the term hardly a day had passed without him assuring Tomasi that at least one of his entries was sure to be selected. In fact, Mapopa seemed so certain of Tomasi's success in the competition that one day during the holiday Tomasi decided to ask him to explain to his very sceptical mother why the competition made him hopeful of continuing with his education.

"Why did you not also take part then?" Nyalupeska, still far from being impressed, asked Mapopa after he had enthusiastically explained to her what the competition was all about.

"Because the folktales had to be written in English," Mapopa replied. "You see, I am not good at English. But Tomasi – oh, he is the best at English in the whole school!"

Were the lady to openly confess it, both Mapopa and Tomasi would have been astonished to learn that the words of Mapopa's last statement were all that Nyalupeska needed in order to share their optimism about the outcome of Tomasi's participation in the competition. To be told that Tomasi was top of his school in English – it could have been in any subject, for that matter – was enough reason for Nyalupeska to be willing to believe that her son also had the ability to convert a few folktales into school fees. Had he not lived up to his teachers' prediction that, because he was top of his class at Chitheba Primary School, he would be

selected for secondary school?

But Nyalupeska did not immediately indicate that she had been won over. It was only after Mapopa had left for his village that she began to speak of the competition as if she too felt she could count on it.

“If you do not succeed in this competition, Tomasi, I do not know what we shall do,” she said to Tomasi’s surprise when the latter, returning from seeing Mapopa off, joined her and his brother Jalani as the two sat on the veranda of her house in the dying sun. Jalani, who had just returned from watering vegetables in the newly opened family *dimba* on the banks of Kasuntha stream, had stopped over at his mother’s house to discuss with her the progress of the vegetable garden.

The *dimba* was a project which Jalani had suggested the family embark on as a possible source of Tomasi’s school fees for the following term. It was watered from a scanty pool at the bottom of a deep well sunk in the bed of a stream that had now been reduced to a dry strip of white sand. The family’s rather desperate plan was as follows: Tomasi would return to school – empty-handed, of course – at the end of the holidays. By the middle of September, the vegetables should be ready for sale, and Jalani, his wife Nyahara and Nyalupeska would then hawk them for cash around Chitheba, mainly among teachers at the school. It was hoped that enough money would thus be raised to cover Tomasi’s fees for the term.

“Yes, you had better win something, Tomasi,” said Jalani

to the further astonishment of his younger brother, for he had been as unimpressed as Nyalupeska about the significance of the folktale competition when Tomasi had told him about it. "I have just been telling mother that we will not get anywhere with the *dimba*. Very soon, there will be no water for the vegetables. That well will in a few days be completely dry. We should have known right from the start that this is not a summer for *madimba*. Never before has Kasuntha stopped flowing as early as June. Yet look how lucky they are in that other part of this same Chitheba: Even the smallest ravine over there is still flowing. Anyway, this competition has come at the right time, Tomasi. We only hope you will be lucky in it."

Had Jalani not used the word 'lucky' in his last statement, Tomasi would have remained puzzled by the two people's change of attitude toward the competition. Unaware that Nyalupeska had briefed Jalani on how an observation made by Mapopa had given her reason to believe that her son might well make a windfall from this business about folktales, Tomasi was now certain his mother and brother had suddenly remembered that he had in his blood what they believed was a luck charm, and that he would therefore be lucky in the competition.

Returning to school a few weeks later, with not even a single tambala of school fees on him, Tomasi had two vivid pictures in his mind as he sat in the Mzuzu-Mzimba bus: the wilting vegetables in the family *dimba* and the confident expressions on the faces of Jalani and Nyalupeska as they

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had said good-bye to him earlier that morning. But there was a third thing that was also quite clear in his mind: Should he not succeed in the competition – God forbid the thought! – the ignorant faith his mother and brother had in luck charms would be shattered.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The folktale competition results, which Tomasi had been waiting for with mounting anxiety, arrived punctually in the middle of the first term of his second academic year. Headmaster Sakala announced with regret at morning assembly that none of the entries from William Koyi had been successful. Only two schools in Malawi, Marymount and Providence Secondary Schools, had had one entry each selected for Mr Howard K. Price's book.

Needless to say, Tomasi was visibly devastated for the rest of the day. His friend Leonard Sibande and Mapopa tried to console him; but they both became speechless after Tomas had explained, for the first time to both of them, how his chances of continuing with school had entirely depended on his success in that competition.

For a whole week following the competition results Tomasi was very much like one in a perpetual trance. Normally a keen

participant in class discussions, he was now noticeably unresponsive as he day-dreamt through each lesson.

Besides Leonard Sibande and Mapopa, another person who was fully aware of the cause of Tomasi's dejected spirits was Miss Woodcock. A fortnight ago, she and Tomasi had talked about the folktale competition. Though Tomasi had not stated it outright, Miss Woodcock could then clearly sense from what he had said that he had been counting on the competition for his school fees. She was therefore not surprised at Tomasi's mood following the announcement of the competition results.

Although she had chosen not to speak either to Tomasi or the headmaster about it, it was clear to Miss Woodcock that Tomasi had not brought school fees for that term. Before the arrival of the competition results she had been somehow certain that Tomasi's people would remit his fees before the end of the term; but Tomasi's very apparent sense of ruination after learning that he had lost the competition made her quite certain that no fees would be sent for the boy.

Miss Woodcock was convinced Tomasi could not go very far in his present state of wretchedness before he would become totally wrecked emotionally. So on the Monday a week after the announcement of the completion results, she decided to see headmaster Sakala first thing in the morning.

"How very kind of them," observed a thoroughly touched Mr Sakala after Miss Woodcock had explained her mission to his office. "I don't suppose the boy has been told about it, has he?"

“Not yet. I thought I should follow my parents’ instructions and wait till the end of the term – in case his people should send him this term’s fees.”

“Of course. And as you’ve rightly said, he was obviously counting on the competition for this year’s school fees. I suppose it’s all right if he’s now told?”

“I should think the sooner the better; otherwise we’ll have an emotional wreck on our hands.” She chuckled with a mixture of pride and sympathy. Then she said: “But I’d rather you did the telling.”

“Oh, sure. I’ll be only too glad to have the honour of announcing such wonderful news to the boy. Shall we do it right away this morning – at break? You’ll have to be there, of course. Is that all right with you?”

“Okay.”

“Fine. Oh I’m so happy for the boy, Miss Woodcock.”

“So am I. He’s such a promising student.”

Since the day the competition results were announced, Tomasi had become quite resigned to his impending expulsion from school. In fact, so resigned had he become that he wished the day would come sooner rather than later, though he knew that was unlikely, as the headmaster would surely give him a period of grace. But when the office messenger delivered the headmaster’s summons to him at the beginning of break later that morning, he virtually collapsed. Sweat broke out on his palms. His knees felt rubbery, his head swam and everything reeled before his eyes; he thought he was going to faint. He even felt a strong

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and urgent need to seek the consolation of Leonard Sibande and Mapopa. He probably would have sought it if his two friends, both of whom were in Form 2B, weren't still in class; for their teacher, Miss Susan Darby, the new Peace Corps teacher who had replaced Miss Briggs, wanted to wind up the lesson before releasing them for break.

Tomasi was confused to find Miss Woodcock in the headmaster's office; he wondered why Mr Sakala would want the lady to witness his expulsion. And then, what was even more confusing, both Mr Sakala and Miss Woodcock greeted him with smiles when he timidly stepped into 'the lion's den', as the students had nicknamed Mr Sakala's office.

"Take a seat, Tomasi," Mr Sakala said, motioning with a wave of his right hand to a straight-back chair facing his desk. "I'm pleased to say I've got good news for you, Tomasi," the headmaster began.

At these words from Mr Sakala, Tomasi, who had been staring at the red-waxed floor, his heart thumping against his ribs, quickly lifted his eyes and incredulously regarded his headmaster. He noticed that Mr Sakala was finding it rather difficult to suppress the smile that lit up his smallish but dignified clean-shaven face. What good news could Mr Sakala have for him? The only thing he could think of was the folktale competition. Had Mr Sakala heard from Mr Howard K. Price again, perhaps this time informing him that he had decided to include one more folktale in his book in addition to those already selected, and one of Tomasi's entries had been chosen? Yes, that must be it; for it would,

come to think of it, also explain the presence of Miss Woodcock, as English teacher, at the meeting. He was about to ask Mr Sakala whether it was about the competition when the headmaster continued.

“Miss Woodcock has done a great thing for you, young man.”

“Correction,” Miss Woodcock cut in with a smile. “Not me – my parents.”

“Well, you too, Miss Woodcock. After all, they couldn’t have known about Tomasi and his situation if it wasn’t for you.”

“Okay – if you look at it that way,” Miss Woodcock conceded with a gentle shrug of the shoulders and then a giggle.

Allowing Tomasi hardly a chance to speculate on what Miss Woodcock’s parents had done for him, Mr Sakala went right ahead after the brief interruption: “Tomasi, Miss Woodcock’s parents have sent you fees for the whole of this academic year. And they have promised that if you pass the JC exam they’ll provide the fees for the final two years of your secondary education as well.”

For a long moment after the headmaster had given him the stunning news, all Tomasi could do was squirm on his seat. He was not dreaming – of that he was quite certain. But perhaps he hadn’t heard Mr Sakala correctly? That was out of the question too; he had heard every word distinctly. Nevertheless, he found himself asking the headmaster: “They have sent me school fees?”

“Yes, Tomasi,” Mr Sakala replied in a tone that seemed to tell the lad ‘I understand your confusion’.

Tomasi turned toward Miss Woodcock and said, “Thank you, madam,” pronouncing the ‘thank’ as if his very soul had gone into the word.

“You’re welcome, Tomasi,” said Miss Woodcock, beaming at him.

“And here’s the cheque for this year’s fees,” said Mr Sakala as he almost reverently picked up the light-blue bank draft that had been lying on his desk’s blotter and held it out before him for Tomasi to see. Then, just as respectfully, he laid the draft on the blotter again and said: “Keep working hard so that you go through the JC exam, for your fees for Forms 3 and 4 are as good as already paid.”

“I am most grateful, Miss Woodcock,” Tomasi said as he regarded the lady, his eyes damp with tears of joy. “I shall come to the house for your parents’ address; I’m going to write them tonight to thank them for their great kindness.”

As he walked to his classroom from the headmaster’s office, constantly being tempted to break into a run for sheer joy, Tomasi was still searching for an explanation as to what had led Miss Woodcock’s parents so kindly decide to assume complete responsibility for his school fees. Suddenly he remembered that back in the headmaster’s office Mr Sakala had said that Miss Woodcock had made her parents aware of his situation. Recalling that remark by Mr Sakala now reminded Tomasi of how, in the second term of his first year, Miss Woodcock had managed to get him to

reveal that he was worried about his education, that he didn't think he would be able to go very far with it. He now recalled how he had refused to explain to her his worry, as such an explanation would inevitably have involved putting before his teacher embarrassing details about his family background. He was quite certain that although he had cut it short, that discussion two terms earlier had prompted Miss Woodcock to write to her parents and tell them about him and the uncertainty of the future of his education.

And that, in fact, was what had happened. Although Tomasi had been evasive in answering her question as to why he was worried about his education, his brooding mood had left Miss Woodcock in no doubt that there was genuine cause for his concern. So, as soon as Tomasi had left her house for the library that evening, she settled down to some hard thinking about the boy's situation. It looked like she would sooner or later witness the second case of a highly promising William Koyi student being expelled from school for lack of fees: Two brightly-shining academic careers snuffed out in the bud by poverty! It really wasn't fair.

By that time Miss Woodcock knew much better than to think that where Tomasi's immediate family had failed, help might come from somewhere in his extended family. Hadn't she counted in vain on someone in James Mwenefumbo's extended family coming to that unfortunate lad's aid? Although what Tomasi had so far told her about his family background seemed to indicate his position was more hopeful than James, it was clear to her that, for some reason,

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Tomasi didn't expect help from any of his people. It may well be that she was the only one who could do something to help him. Thus she there and then decided to write to her parents, who operated a successful restaurant business in London, and ask if they could come to the aid of a brilliant lad whose education was threatened by hopeless poverty.

Miss Woodcock's parents had been very prompt in responding to their daughter's appeal on behalf of Tomasi. Their bank draft for Tomasi's school fees had reached her a week before the end of that same term. But they instructed their daughter not even to tell Tomasi about it "until you're absolutely certain his people have completely failed to raise his fees." Explaining this embargo, Miss Woodcock's parents wrote: "You've told us how Tomasi's mother is struggling to raise his fees term by term. Who knows, the dedicated lady may well toil on till she sees her son through secondary school. We've no right to deprive her of the joy that comes from a struggle on behalf of a loved one."

The bell for the end of break rang just as Tomasi was passing what was roughly the half-way point between the administration building and his classroom block. As he entered Form 2A, Tomasi saw through the window opposite the door that Miss Woodcock was walking towards his classroom, her teaching books under her plump arm. Not having bothered to look at the timetable that morning, as had usually been the case ever since the folktale competition results made him lose all interest in his work, he rushed to

his desk to check from his copy of the timetable if it was indeed her period. It was.

Tomasi was dazzled by what had happened to him. Although he tried very hard to concentrate, his mind kept wandering throughout Miss Woodcock's lesson. He thought about the lady herself, marvelling at her kindness. Then he dwelt on the likely response of his mother and elder brother to the wonderful news: First, he once again saw through his mind's eye the wilted vegetables in the family *dimba*, recalling as he did so Nyalupeska and Jalani's superstitious confidence in the outcome of the folktale competition. He inwardly smiled as he imagined their disillusionment with luck charms upon reading in the letter he would write them tonight that he had been unsuccessful in the competition. Then secondly, he pictured their ecstatic joy upon reading, later in the same letter, about Miss Woodcock's parents' kind deed to him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“**C**hitheba must now be a very happy area,” Tomasi observed as he caught up with Mapopa. The two were walking back to their classrooms after a brief after-lunch rest in their rooms. In Tomasi’s shirt pocket was a blue envelope containing a letter he had just received from his mother.

Actually, Tomasi had not expected to receive any letter that day; so that the head prefect took him by surprise when, going from table to table in the dining hall during lunch distributing letters to students, he stopped at his table to hand him the letter. Checking the post mark on the envelope as it lay beside his lunch plate, Tomasi decided that the letter had come from a friend back home, as it was too soon for him to expect his mother’s response to the letter in which he had told her and his elder brother about the wonderful thing that had just happened to him. But, when he opened it as he lay resting on his bed a while later, he was surprised to discover that the letter was in fact from his mother.

“Why’s that?” Mapopa asked, though he was quite certain his friend meant Chitheba was happy now that one of its sons had unexpectedly found financial help that would enable him to complete his secondary education.

“I’ve just received a letter from home informing me that Mzguli Beza is dead.”

“What?” Mapopa cried out, stopping in his tracks and turning round to study his friend’s face. “You are joking, aren’t you?”

“Why would I joke about a thing like that? Mzguli has been killed by a python.” Tomasi’s tone was still matter-of-fact, devoid of any emotion.

“But that’s wonderful news, Tomasi! Come along and give me all the details.” He excitedly took him by the hand and led him to the shade of a nearly muula tree. “Killed by a python, eh? Sounds like the case of a *wira* turning against its own master! What exactly happened?” He rubbed his hands happily while his eyes smiled at Tomasi.

“He was coiled and crushed to death by the python during an inspection tour of his beehives.”

“Great! But you surprised me, Tomasi. How can you take such wonderful news so coolly?”

“It’s you who surprise me, Mapopa,” Tomasi told his friend reproachfully. “I said just now that Chitheba must be happy at the death of Mzguli because I know people there believe he was a wizard. But, honestly, I didn’t think you too had such thoughts about the poor man.”

“But Mzguli was a dreaded wizard, Tomasi.”

“What proof was there that he was a wizard?”

“Proof? What proof can you find against any wizard?”

Mapopa sounded as if his friend had just said the most absurd thing. “The man even looked like a wizard: Those ears – so wrinkled and lying so flat along the head as if glued to it! His very face was plainly sinister – the eyes set so high that the man hardly had a forehead! And the way the little forehead protruded over his eyes made him look even more evil. Even the way he talked betrayed him as a voracious wizard – saliva flying all over the place whenever he talked. Obviously anyone he talked to made him salivate, being potential meat to him! Oh yes – that the man was a wizard there can be no doubt.”

Tomasi chuckled dryly and then said: “All you’ve said about the poor man relates to his physical nature. Are you telling me that anyone with any of those physical characteristics is a wizard? Take for example Leonard Sibande, our mutual friend. His ears are exactly like Mzguli’s, both in shape and in angle to the head. You don’t seem to think of him as evil on account of that. Your favourite teacher, Mr Phiri, the mathematics master, has even less of a forehead than Mzguli had; and yet you seem to think he’s the greatest man in the whole world! And to think that a man is a human-flesh-eating wizard simply because he can’t speak without saliva flying from his mouth is utter nonsense. The defect is found in some of the best people, and you know that. Chitheba was being most unfair to that poor man in calling him a wizard without any proof whatsoever.”

Mapopa kept quiet for a moment and Tomasi could see that he was thinking hard. Finally he said: "I didn't want to say this. But since you are so insistent on proof, I'm compelled to remind you about how your father died. The way the *madoda* in my village explained it at the *mphala*, I wouldn't have thought there could be any doubt as to who the culprit was."

"There has never been any doubt in my mind as to the culprit for my dear father's death – the leopard that mauled him."

"Just the leopard? Then why didn't your grandfather also die?"

"Obviously my father must have been more seriously injured by the beast than my grandfather!" Tomasi said with a dry chuckle. Then he waited, expecting his friend to counter his reply. When Mapopa remained quiet, he produced another chuckle and continued, "So it's not only my family and old Wanthembo then who believe Mzguli bewitched my father.... And you know, that liar of a witchdoctor went as far as to suggest that all of us in my family should let him put into our blood some so-called protective medicine against any further harm from Mzguli!"

At the words 'put into our blood', Tomasi held up toward Mapopa the insides of his wrists, pointing at one and then the other as he spoke the words.

"And *you* agreed?" exclaimed an astonished Mapopa, pointing at his friend. "You, the well-known non-believer in superstition – you agreed?"

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“Of course not!”

“But you have a pair of *simbo* on the inside of each wrist!”

The sudden realisation of his thoughtlessness in exposing the little scars to Mapopa so confused Tomasi that he momentarily lacked the presence of mind to think of lying about those *simbo*: “Oh, these are about something different,” he said, speaking quickly as he nervously held out his wrists once more. “These are merely about a luck charm....”

At this point the bell for the beginning of afternoon classes rang.

“A luck charm?” Mapopa asked as the two left the muula shade and began to walk toward the classroom block. “Wanthembo put a luck charm in you?”

By now Tomasi’s mind had cleared sufficiently for him to realise that he had been foolish not to have lied about the accusing *simbo*. He simply had to do his best to save the situation. “Don’t be so unreasonable as to suppose I’d let Wanthembo do such a thing to me,” he said, barely keeping his nervous voice from shaking. “These *simbo* were made by a friend of mine when one day he and I jokingly agreed to play witchdoctors. We decided to feel what it would be like to have a witchdoctor put some herbal medicine into our blood through *simbo*. And so, using a razor blade, we made incisions on the insides of each other’s wrists. We then chewed mupapa leaves and rubbed the paste into the incisions. We jokingly said we had put into each other a luck charm!” He concluded with a supposedly hearty giggle.

“I see,” Mapopa said with a chuckle as he turned on his heels and began to walk towards the classes. Tomasi followed in relieved silence. When they reached the Form 2B classroom Mapopa called to his friend “See you later” and entered the classroom. Tomasi, after responding with a quieter-than-usual “See you”, walked on to Form 2A. He was reasonably certain that his belated half-lie about the *simbo* had worked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When his mother's response to the great thing Miss Woodcock's parents had done for him eventually came, Tomasi was not sure what to make of it. Knowing that Nyalupeska believed she had put in his blood a charm that would move people to like him and help him, it puzzled him that she should in her letter attribute the Woodcocks' generosity entirely to 'the Lord our God'.

Nyalupeska had written: "...The same God who sent manna from heaven to feed the hungry Israelites in the wilderness; the same God who rescued from starvation the widow of Zarephath and her son; ...that same God has now looked down with compassion upon this needy family. It is God who moved your teacher to write to her parents and tell them about our problems with your school fees. And it is the Lord our God who moved those people in faraway *Mangalande* to do us this great kindness..."

That was his mother all right – the word 'God' ever on her bible-quoting lips. Semi-literate though she was,

Nyalupeska knew her bible. She could even deliver sermons in church on Sundays – the only illiterate church elder in the area that could do this. And she owed it all to her prodigious memory: Whenever literate fellow elders read out bible passages during their preaching, Nyalupeska would take careful mental note of the chapters and verses referred to. In this way she had committed to memory – chapter-and-verse – many bible passages. She was thus as prepared as any of her literate counter-parts to preach the Word whenever appointed to do so. On such occasions she herself would choose the scripture text on which to base her sermon, and then ask someone literate to read it out to the congregation for her. And her profound memory also served her when it came to selecting hymns for her services. She knew by heart the numbers of a good number of hymns in *Sumu za Ukebristu*, the Chitumbuka hymnal.

In a way, therefore, it was quite in character for Nyalupeska to respond to the great thing that had happened to her son the way she had done. But, under the circumstances, Tomasi was rather astonished by this response – not so much by what his mother had said as by what she had left unsaid. Of course he had never expected Nyalupeska to write back and exclaim, “See, luck charms work!” His mother couldn’t have directly referred to the so-called luck charm in her letter, considering she dictated her letters to Kondwani, Julizga’s little boy; she certainly wouldn’t want the boy to know she had done such a thing to Tomasi. But Tomasi did expect the letter to include at least

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a veiled reference to the charm. Thus it struck him as rather odd that his mother should completely replace the so-called luck charm with God in her jubilation at something which he expected her to attribute to the former rather than the latter.

Then a sudden thought occurred to Tomasi: It was just possible that his mother had been converted away from belief in superstition by Mzguli's death. Yes, it may well be that the destruction of one she had always supposed to be an indestructible destroyer had made her realize the senselessness of believing in protective medicines. And that realization may have led her to look at her belief in luck charms a little more critically as well. She might as a result have discovered that Wanthembo was neither the luckiest nor the best-liked person in Chitheba. And this discovery might well have made her realise the foolishness of believing that such an individual knew of charms that could make one to be liked by one's fellows. Besides, she might have thought, if Wanthembo indeed knew the magic formula to being lucky, why were his two grown-up sons still in Chitheba, jobless and as ragged as their father, despite many job-hunting trips to Mzuzu, Lilongwe and even Blantyre? Yes, it was just possible that his mother had had such thoughts following the death of Mzguli, and that as a result of these thoughts she had finally come to see superstition for what it really was – unreasonable.

He looked forward to finding out during the coming holidays what exactly had happened to his mother.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When Tomasi went home for the holidays, both the Woodcocks' generous assistance and Mzguli's death were of course thoroughly discussed among him, Jalani and Nyalupeska throughout the very day he arrived in the village. And in the evening of the same day, when the three gathered in Nyalupeska's kitchen hut for a chat, Nyalupeska decided to take the opportunity to spell out more fully to her two sons the dependability of 'the Lord our God'.

"Like sheep, sometimes we go astray," she sermonised. "We act as if we do not know we have the Lord our God as our shepherd. Yet He does not leave us unprotected and helpless: Our enemies are powerless before Him, and our problems He easily solves for us..."

"Er, let me also say something here," said Jalani self-consciously, being fairly certain that the squirming impatience with which he had heard out his mother as she preached her little sermon was conspicuous. "Tomasi, now

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that there is no longer the problem of fees, it is entirely up to you. We want you to go as far as the university. We want you to go to *Mangalande*. True, our family does not have any known enemies now; but that does not mean we are without ill-wishers who are ready to laugh their loudest should you fail to become somebody in life. This great thing those good people in *Mangalande* have done for us is a big opportunity for you – for us all in this family.” He concluded with a fake cough of contentment.

Throughout Jalani’s speech Tomasi’s attention had been divided between listening to his brother and pondering over what his mother had just said. Though in her ‘sermon’ Nyalupeska had not referred to Mzguli by name, nor had she mentioned the so-called luck charm, he wanted to believe that his mother had been confessing her sin of believing in superstition. However, one thing puzzled him just now: He could not understand why, despite the fact that they regarded Mzguli as a dangerous enemy of the family, his mother and elder brother had never made a second attempt to have him protected from the man. That they had instead concerned themselves with getting him to accept a so-called luck charm puzzled him even more now than it had puzzled him that night nearly two years ago in that same hut. But, for some reason, he did not feel like asking them to explain themselves.

Perhaps his reluctance was due to the general feeling of goodwill and tolerance that had been with him since he had found out earlier during the day that his grandfather had

suddenly changed his attitude toward Gogo Chemeni's household. For one thing, he had learnt that old Panji had acted generously to save the household from the dreadful famine that currently stalked that part of Chitheba: The old man had bartered one of his heifers for a granaryful of maize for the joint use of members of Gogo Chemeni's household. The maize had already been transferred from southern Chitheba – where it had been bought only the previous month – to Nyalupeska's big granary. And then, during the same month, old Panji had done one other unexpected good deed – this one quite unconnected to the famine. He had presented Jalani with a heifer, explaining that he had done so to see if Jalani would be luckier with livestock than his parents. And, on top of all this, Gogo Chemeni had made it a point to report to Tomasi that a few weeks earlier she had taken the courage to talk to her husband again about his grandson. The old lady had told Tomasi that his grandfather had finally relented, and that Tomasi should expect to be invited to a *mphamba*-drinking ritual any day now.

Old Panji's sudden change of attitude to Gogo Chemeni's household had been variously explained to Tomasi by Gogo Chemeni, Nyalupeska and Jalani. Gogo Chemeni had been quick to point out that the *mzimu* of the old man's late father had finally shown him the wrongness of his partiality in dealing with members of his own family. The departed man's spirit, Gogo Chemeni had assured Tomasi, must have been reasoning with old Panji ever since

the latter had heard that total strangers in faraway *Mangalande* had undertaken what should really have been his burden – paying his grandson's school fees. Nyalupeska had, of course, spoken much about the divine hand in explaining to Tomasi her father-in-law's change of heart. As for Jalani, he had simply told his younger brother that old Panji's changed attitude was nothing but a face-saving move after the old man had realised that Tomasi was going to continue with his education even without his assistance.

Whatever was responsible for old Panji's change of heart, Tomasi was so happy about it that as soon as he had learnt of it his attitude toward his grandfather had suddenly changed. As far as he was concerned, the old man had adequately made amends for all his past wrongs. Tomasi was even prepared to participate in the *mphamba* drinking whenever the old man would invite him to do so, though he knew the superstitious ritual was utterly pointless....

And now, as he sat with his elder brother and mother in the latter's kitchen hut, this positive attitude was still so much with him that, rather than argue with Nyalupeska and Jalani about superstition, he decided instead to respond to what Jalani had said, knowing his audience would find that much more agreeable.

"I shall do my best, brother," he said pleasantly. "I am already studying hard for the examinations which we shall write in July next year. They are important examinations, because one has to pass them in order to be allowed to go on to Form 3."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Back again in Chitheba after writing the Junior Certificate examinations the following year, Tomasi spent the better part of the August holiday thinking troubled thoughts about those exams. He was particularly worried about maths and physical science, his weakest subjects. Despite having worked very hard to prepare himself for the two subjects, he had found these papers extremely difficult. He knew he had done brilliantly in the other five subjects; but that hardly lessened his fears. For if he failed maths and physical science, he would not have enough subjects to qualify for a pass.

It was an even more tense time for Nyalupeska. Her son had said that he needed to pass those examinations in order for him to continue to Form 3. What if Tomasi's education, whose future was now very bright thanks to the *bazungu's* help, was suddenly to be cut short by his failing those examinations? Her two nephews, Kondwani and Chiza were expecting their Primary Leaving Examinations results any time now. What if they passed and were selected for

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secondary school while Tomasi – the Lord God forbid – failed and was therefore dropped out of school? She even had recurring nightmares in which both boys had replaced her son at William Koyi Secondary School, to which Kapopo's son Mapopa had returned after passing the examinations his friend had failed.... Tomasi just had to pass, so that he could continue with his education; otherwise the embarrassment would simply be unbearable for her: The whole of Chitheba was now aware that the burden of her son's school fees was no longer being borne by her, but by *bazungu*. How they would all laugh should Tomasi fail to make full use of such an enviable opportunity!

The outlook was no less worrying to Jalani. His personal prestige had risen considerably as a result of his younger brother having gained the recognition of *bazungu* in *Mangalande*. And it would be less than truthful for him to deny that he had been rather boastful about it, at beer drinks and even on more sober occasions. How was he going to take the derisive laughter of those who had endured his crowing if Tomasi's education were to be cut short because of nothing but the boy's inadequacy? What was more, Tomasi's education was important to the progress of everyone in the family. He simply had to pass the examinations so as to continue with school.

As for Gogo Chemeni, she was mercifully spared the entire nightmare, being blissfully ignorant of the significance of the examinations that were causing the other three so much anxiety.

* * *

The good news arrived suddenly one October afternoon. It came in the form of a note from headmaster Hara of Chitheba Primary School informing Tomasi that he had heard the JC results on the radio, and that both he and Mapopa had passed. The note was brought to Tomasi by a boy of the village, who told him that Hara had also sent Mapopa a note.

Later in the afternoon Tomasi set off for Thandeka village to celebrate with his friend their having surmounted yet another hurdle on the arduous road of education. Unknown to him, Mapopa was at about the same time also starting off for Musa village on a mission similar to his, for the pupil who had brought him Hara's note had told him that Hara had also sent Tomasi a note telling him that he had passed.

The two happy friends met halfway between her villages.

"We've passed!" Tomasi cried out when his friend suddenly came into view upon emerging from around a bend in the footpath.

"We've passed!" Mapopa echoed as the two half-ran half-danced toward each other.

They embraced briefly and then skipped about for sheer joy, their jubilant shrieks reverberating in the eastern slopes of Mutanthambwe mountain in whose shadow the footpath ran.

"Although I didn't tell you, *nganya*, I was worried to death about those exams," Tomasi said breathlessly. "I had grave doubts about maths and physical science."

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“I should also have told you that I had lost hope,” said a panting Mapopa. “English was worrying me stiff.”

“Anyway, JC is now behind us.”

“It is indeed, *nganya!*” Mapopa virtually sang the words. “Here we come, Form 3!” He took both his friend’s hands and they danced about, once again sending the slopes of Mutanthambwe echoing with their shrieks of joy.

When it was eventually time to part, they once again congratulated each other and then said good-bye, noting that they would see each other again in a week’s time, when they would be leaving for William Koyi.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tomasi's class set a new record in the history of JC results at William Koyi. None had failed the exams as against ten failures during the school's first JC exams. However, spectacular as it was, this performance was to be eclipsed by the results of the Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations, the school's first, when they were announced two months later: Ten William Koyi students out of the 90 that had passed the exams got selected for the university. Certainly no mean achievement for a school that new.

Among those William Koyi students who had not passed well enough to gain admission to the university were Sam Thole and Eunice Paliani. These two had been the most brilliant students in Form 4. Their problem was that, although they had passed the other subjects very well, they had failed maths. And in those unfortunate two, the mathematics master, Mr Phiri, found perfect examples for his warning to those who were weak in that compulsory subject.

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Mr Phiri naturally concentrated his warning on Form 4 students, the next ones to write the all-important MSCE exams. However, Tomasi's class (Form 3A) had so many students, Tomasi among them, who were "veritable goats in maths" (as Mr. Phiri was wont to describe them) that it also got its share of his warnings:

"Those of you who have dreams of going to the university should know that you are an endangered species if you are like our two friends, Sam Thole and Eunice Paliani," he would tell Tomasi's class in his grimly humorous language. "I used to warn those two they would be sorry if they didn't work at their maths. They thought I was singing a boring song... Well, perhaps it's not fair to blame them entirely. After all, their class was the first at this school to write the MSCE; so they had no precedent from which to take warning. Not so with you. You've had the Thole-Paliani warning; and there will certainly be one or two casualties from this year's Form 4 for you to learn a lesson from."

Throughout that academic year, Tomasi – Mr Phiri's warning always ringing in his mind – worked hard on his maths. Much of his individual study time during the Christmas and April holidays was also spent on this subject.

Despite all these efforts, however, he left Form 3 with a disappointing record in maths.

But the following academic year – the crucial one in which he was to write the awesome MSCE – began on a hopeful note for Tomasi. Somehow his performance in

maths suddenly picked up. He was certain he owed this abrupt improvement to the rather interesting fact that Kennedy Nyambose – who had been brilliant in maths in the previous Form 4 class – was not one of the seven William Koyi students who had been selected for the university that year because, although he had passed maths with a distinction, he had failed the exam because he had not passed English. Certainly Kennedy's fate had helped Tomasi psychologically, if only because it had taken the edge off Mr Phiri's demoralizing warnings – which continued all right, but the man was now a little less noisy about his maths.

And about four months to the MSCE exams, Tomasi's rising hope was given a further boost in the parting words of Miss Woodcock on the eve of her return to Britain following the end of her term of duty.

"You shouldn't have any doubts about going to the university if you keep up your improved work in maths," she told him that evening when he came to her house to say good-bye to her and to once more thank her for her role in her parents' decision to take over the burden of paying his school fees. "You can be confident of excellent results in the other six subjects, particularly in English. So, as you'll no doubt do exceptionally well in English – a very important subject, along with maths, for university admission – you only need just a good pass in maths. Therefore take heart; your chances are very good – as long as you continue working on your maths."

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“Thank you for your encouraging words, madam,” Tomasi said – and meant it: The way the lady had put it filled him with the confidence he knew he would need during the remaining months before the exams.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Tomasi was in a daze when he emerged from the MSCE examination hall that June morning. It was as if he had not even studied for the last paper of the exam. Surely these people did not want him to go to the university: How could they make maths that difficult? Two days earlier he had found the physical science paper so difficult that he had thought it would have to be the hardest of all the seven subjects he was going to write. With maths still to come, he should have known better than to thus deceive himself.

Passing by Walter Elmslie hostel on his way to his room in M'Mbelwa hostel, Tomasi stopped at the former hostel's laundry sinks where Mapopa, who had finished his maths paper earlier, was doing his washing in preparation for their trip back to Chitheba the following morning.

"I'm done for, Mapopa," Tomasi lamented as he weakly sat down on the crab-grass lawn overlooking the row of sinks. He disgustedly slammed down beside him his box of mathematical instrument and booklet of mathematical

tables. "Really done for. No longer am I an endangered species, as Mr. Phiri would say. I'm now a doomed species."

Mapopa, who hadn't seen his friend approaching, having faced the other way as he had worked his clothes in the sink, paused in his washing and turned toward Tomasi. "That makes two of us then," he told Tomasi as he flicked his hands to rid them of the suds.

Knowing that Mapopa was referring to his performance in the English papers, which he had been moaning a lot about, Tomasi said: "But at least you haven't failed your English, I'm fairly sure of that. I *know* I've failed maths... and physical science... I'm finished!"

"Just why you insist that I've passed English is quite beyond me."

"English has been tough, I'll grant that. But I'm sure you'll at least get a pass in it – okay, perhaps it'll be a poor pass. And you're assured of your distinction in maths and good passes in the rest of the subjects: That's saying much more than one can say for me. No, I think you stand a much better chance than I do, Mapopa; especially considering that English has been tough enough to just prevent me from getting a distinction in it."

"Actually, Tomasi, I firmly believe that the element of luck is always involved in things like exams," Mapopa said, lowering his voice as he stepped closer to his seated friend. "So I think you stand a better chance than I."

"How's that?" Tomasi asked, looking up at his friend in puzzlement. "How am I more likely to be lucky than you?"

“Well, I remember you told me some time ago – I think we were then in Form 2 – about a luck charm you said a friend had put in your blood. I –”

Tomasi interrupted him with a laugh of assumed amusement. “Honestly, I would never have thought you still remembered the childish joke!” he said. “Anyway, what does that have to do with exams?”

Mapopa sat down beside Tomasi. “Actually, I’d forgotten all about it until just now when I suddenly remembered how you’ve been so lucky over the past three years as to have your fees paid by people who haven’t even seen you,” he said. “I’m of the opinion, Tomasi, that although you yourself were genuinely and innocently joking, that friend of yours put in your blood the real thing – a potent luck charm which has already begun to work for you. Just think about it: James had a fees problem too. But Miss Woodcock didn’t do anything about it; and he had to be expelled from school. So, if your luck charm is so powerful as to move white people – total strangers who have never seen you – to take over the task of paying your school fees, then it certainly can be relied upon to influence the outcome of an exam.”

Mapopa was surprised that although he had said the foregoing in a measured, emphatic manner, and could therefore have been easily interrupted by his friend, Tomasi had let him speak uninterrupted. Little did he know that Tomasi had kept silent because he had been deep in thought: The way Mapopa had put his speculation had

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made it rather difficult for him to refute it. And long before Mapopa had finished talking, Tomasi's scientifically-inclined mind had begun to wonder why, indeed, Miss Woodcock had helped him after omitting to help his close friend of Form 1 days – James Mwenefumbo. After all, James' situation had been much more hopeless than his, at least in view of the facts then available to the lady about the two boys' predicaments. And it was obvious that Miss Woodcock had thought both of them to be promising students. What then could reasonably explain why she had thought of helping him, after having completely ignored an equally deserving and even more needy student?

In the face of this, Tomasi just couldn't in all honesty dismiss Mapopa's speculation. Suddenly he began to have second thoughts about what his mother had put in his blood. However, he was quick to realize that if he did nothing about Mapopa's renewed interest in the entirely embarrassing luck charm business, the whole of Chitheba area would soon know about it. He simply had to prevent that, whatever else might follow as a result of the charm. And so, no sooner did Mapopa finish speaking than Tomasi fell over on his back, sending up to the sky a loud laugh which he was at pains to make sound as genuine as possible.

"I didn't know I was that good at jokes!" he said between fits of the fake laughter. "So you fell for it, I mean that joke about my *simbo*!..." A few more fits, then he sat up again and held out to his friend – who was by now looking rather foolish – the insides of his wrists. "These *simbo*, my dear sir,

have nothing to do with two boys playing witchdoctors. They were made by my loving mother to put medicine into my wrists after I had sprained both of them during a struggle with a calf that had bolted out of the kraal in an attempt to go with the adult cattle to the grazing grounds,” he lied elaborately. “So you really fell for that luck charm joke, eh? But couldn’t you read from my face that I was only joking? Ha! ha! ha!”

“Enough of it!” said an embarrassed Mapopa as he rose to return to his washing. “You and your stupid jokes!”

With seeming dying gasps of a purportedly good laugh, Tomasi picked up his instrument box and tables booklet and stood up, saying: “I really ought to be doing my laundry too. I’ll be joining you in a while.”

Although he had succeeded in ensuring that Chitheba area would never hear of the luck charm affair, Tomasi, as he did his washing beside Mapopa, was having a difficult time suppressing the gnawing worry his friend’s speculation about the charm had put into him. How awfully frightening was the thought of it! For if Miss Woodcock and her parents had indeed been moved into helping him by the powder his mother had put in his blood, it meant the stuff had virtually taken over his life. And he was positive he couldn’t be happy living a life run by a charm, a life run by remote control, as it were. It would be most frightening.

There was one ray of hope, however: He was quite certain that the luck charm, whether it really worked or not, was not going to help him with the outcome of the MSCE

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exams. The truth of the matter was that, charm or no charm, he did not stand half a chance of going to the university. And that meant he might as well forget about his number one ambition – emulating Mr. Sakala, his idol, by ultimately going to Britain. So scared had he become of Mapopa's speculation being correct that he actually began to feel good about what he took to be the certainty that he would fail to go the university; for should he qualify for university, there would be no denying that what his mother had put in his blood was indeed something with powers to make him lucky in a big way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The 'good' news – that is, what would originally have been bad news – came two months later with the MSCE results. Tomasi had passed English with distinction all right, but had failed maths as expected. He had almost failed physical science, and had passed with credit only in two of the remaining four subjects. Thus, despite the distinction in English, he had failed to pass well enough to earn himself a place at the university. For Mapopa too the actuality wasn't far removed from what he had been expecting: He had performed so miserably that he too had missed the university.

Although Tomasi had been expecting as much, and had in fact written to Miss Woodcock immediately after the exams to tell her that he didn't expect the results to be good, yet to know for a fact that he had missed the university became a different matter altogether. He was crushed. So the worst had actually happened! The future looked much gloomier than he had ever imagined. And he just knew

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people were laughing at him and his family for his failure to take full advantage of the rare opportunity that had come his way.

However, with regard to his fears over the luck charm, the exam results were a sort of relief to Tomasi. But it was a short-lived relief, for within days of his getting the results, he received a letter that made the insides of his wrists to actually ache with throbbing.

The letter was from Miss Woodcock. It read:

Dear Tomasi

Your letter found me already doing some thinking regarding the future of your education. In fact, your education has been of interest to me ever since that chat you, Mapopa, Miss Briggs and I had under a musuku tree four years ago when our bus broke down on the Mzuzu-Mzimba road.

There's of course no certainty that you won't make it to the university, or that you won't find any other course. But now that you've written the exams and have given me an idea as to what you feel are your chances, I suppose I could tell you what I've been thinking.

Since you're obviously very interested in the English language and are exceptionally good at it, I thought it might interest you, should things not work out for you there, to come over to Britain and take an

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advanced course in English. After the course, you could do some teacher training for a while and thereafter return to your country and then try to get a job as an English teacher in a secondary school.

Would you be interested in coming over in case you are not offered anything there? I'm sure by the time you get this letter the exam results will have been announced. So write back as soon as you hear the results to let me know.

Should the results be unfavourable and you're interested in coming over, your air ticket, school fees and other requirements here will, of course, be taken care of by my parents and me.

Mum and Dad send their regards and wish you success in the MSCE; but they are at the same time looking forward to seeing you here if things don't work out for you there!

Good luck with the MSCE!

Sincerely

Heather

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Tomasi found Miss Woodcock's letter nothing but bad news. As far as he was concerned, it was an indisputable confirmation of the correctness of Mapopa's speculation on the luck charm: Just when he should have been a total failure and a laughing stock, he was about to realise his number one ambition – to become another 'Britain', another Mr. Sakala. That was being lucky all right. Like Mr. Sakala, he would go to Britain, where he would probably master English to the extent that his former headmaster had mastered it; he would then return home, at that point very much like Mr. Sakala his idol in mannerisms and all; then he would of course land a teaching job in a secondary school, probably rising before long to the position of headmaster... It was a prospect about which he would have been jubilant under different circumstances. But this luck charm factor made it all bad news, for it would mean he would have achieved his ambition by the remote control of the charm, an idea he found not only repellent but terribly frightening as well.

It was all a great pity though, for it was a development that would have delighted every member of his family. Besides, it would have been a real consolation for him and his family in the wake of the exam results disaster. And to think his favourite sister, Towela, who was born just before him, was right now in the village! Ironically, she had arrived only that day – just hours before Tomasi received Miss Woodcock's letter – having travelled on foot for one and a half days from Utonga, where she was married, Nengezi,

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her six-month-old baby girl, on her back. It was thus with deep regret that Tomasi decided to tell no one in his family about Miss Woodcock's rejected offer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Because Tomasi had been in a state of melancholy ever since the arrival of the results (eating little and completely ignoring his favourite hobby – reading), it was understandable that Nyalupeska and Jalani failed to notice a further lowering of his spirits the day he received Miss Woodcock's letter. That evening, therefore, when the entire household gathered in Nyalupeska's kitchen hut for a sort of reunion chat with Towela, nothing seemed to have changed in the family's prevailing gloom caused by the exam results. Thus, the chat over, they dispersed to their respective sleeping places without so much as a premonition of what was about to happen.

From his mother's kitchen hut Tomasi went straight to join Chiza and Kondwani on the sleeping mat in his hut. But there wasn't going to be any sleeping for him that night. As his two cousins snored away beside him, he tossed and turned and sweated, thinking troubled thoughts about his life.

It really wasn't his life any more, was it? How could it be said to be his life when he carried such a potent charm in his blood? There were those who would be glad to have such a charm in their system; but he was not that type. If only he had known, he would never have let his mother put the charm in his blood. Yes, in forcing the charm on him – although he knew they had meant well for him – his mother and elder brother had effectively destroyed his life forever....

All at once, he made what seemed to him an inevitable decision under the circumstances. He got up, put on his shorts and shirt and went out into the chilly night, hoping that there were still some live charcoals under the ashes of the fireplace in his mother's kitchen hut. Entering the hut – no one slept there – he found that one of the logs was still glowing. He took the smouldering log back with him to his hut; and with it, after blowing its burning end to a flame, lit his *koloboyi*. Then he found his pen and a piece of paper and wrote his sister Towela a note. He then went out into the night again. When he reached his mother's house, where Nyalupeska and Towela were sleeping, he slipped the note under the door and returned to his hut.

Acting quietly so as not to wake his snoring cousins, he set about removing the clothes that were hanging on a rope tied across the one-room hut from one rafter to the one opposite it. After he had removed all the clothes from the rope, putting them on his reading table, he reached to the rafters and untied both ends of the rope. Then, the four-

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metre, strong-fibre rope folded and tucked under his arm, he blew out the *koloboyi* and tiptoed out of the hut. He slid the lattice-worked reed shutter back across the hut's doorway and then headed for the muula tree that loomed behind his mother's kitchen hut in the moonless darkness.

Tomasi stood under the tree for several minutes, hesitating. From his uncle Julizga's chicken coop, a cock flapped its wings and then crowed, heralding the early stages of dawn. An owl hooted in a thicket not far from the muula tree, and a hyena howled in the distance.

With some difficulty, Tomasi, the rope now slung on his shoulder, climbed the branchless first two metres of the trunk. Then he sat in the tree's lowest crotch for a long moment, thinking as to whether he should really go ahead and do what he must do. Another owl hooted in the general direction of Jalani's house, which wasn't far from the muula tree.

Reaching for the next branch above him, he grasped it and hoisted himself onto the tree's second crotch, some eight metres above the ground. Here again he sat for several seconds, thinking about the drastic deed he was about to commit. Then, hands working quickly, he made a secure noose at one end of the rope and, after slipping the noose over his head and then pulling it tight round his neck, he tied the other end firmly round the sturdy branch on which he was sitting. Another long moment of hesitation and then he leapt off the crotch towards the ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Tomasi's groans as the noose choked him were eventually picked up by Jalani. Thinking it was some wild animal, Jalani, clad only in his trousers, snatched his spears and clubs and crept out to investigate.

As he stole along quietly in the darkness, one of his spears poised for quick action, Jalani was baffled by the nature of the commotion coming from the direction of the muula tree. The desperate groaning and moaning seemed to suggest a frantic struggle, and yet he listened in vain for the sounds of a scuffle on the ground. But everything suddenly fell into place when he finally began to pick up faint words in the groaning – words that told of someone in the process of taking his own life. Although the strangled voice wasn't clear enough for him to recognise it, Jalani immediately thought of his crestfallen younger brother. He ran the remaining metres.

"Why, Tomasi, why?" Jalani said after establishing that it was indeed his younger brother swinging from the tree. He

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asked the question repeatedly as he quickly climbed the tree, having thrown down his spears and clubs. Before long he had undone the knot round the branch, causing Tomasi, who was by now unconscious, to drop to the ground in a heap. Then Jalani jumped down, gathered up his limp younger brother, hoisted him onto his shoulder and, his weapons forgotten, carried him and the rope to Nyalupeska's house.

Jalani laid his unconscious younger brother on the bare ground in the backyard of the house and then rushed round to the door to wake his mother and sister.

"Quick!" Jalani barked in an urgent whisper when his sister answered his hasty knocking. "Bring water! Tomasi is unconscious."

"Unconscious?" the two ladies exclaimed together as Towela opened the door while Nyalupeska, with nothing on except her blanket, dashed to the corner in which she kept her water pot.

"What has happened, Jalani?" Towela cried out when she and Nyalupeska scrambled onto the veranda where Jalani was waiting for them.

"Not so loud! People must not hear us; it is a shameful thing. I found Tomasi hanging from the muula tree by the neck with this rope." He waved the folded rope before the two ladies.

"What?" Nyalupeska and Towela exclaimed in one breath as they jumped down from the veranda and followed Jalani, the water pot on Nyalupeska's head.

As Towela stood by speechless, her mouth cupped in her palms in shocked bewilderment, Nyalupeska busied herself with emptying the entire potful of water on prostrate Tomasi, muttering with great anxiety as she doused him: "Why did you do this, my son? What is failing to go to university that you should want to take your life over it? Why, my son, did you do such a dreadful thing? Huh? Why?"

The cold water eventually forced out of Tomasi a shrill sound which Nyalupeska, Jalani and Towela took to be a sign he was regaining consciousness. Thus no sooner did Nyalupeska and Towela hear the sound than the two ladies dropped to their knees in the mud around Tomasi, hugging him.

"Thank God you are still with us, my son," Nyalupeska muttered as she put her cheek against Tomasi's, her blanket trailing in the mud.

"God has brought you back, dear brother!" Towela, finding her voice at last, exclaimed in a relieved whisper.

But there were no further signs that Tomasi was coming round; so the two ladies rose to their feet again, and the three stood around, confused, hoping but at the same time fearing the worst.

Then Towela's baby began to cry in Nyalupeska's house. As she entered the house to get the little one, Towela stepped on Tomasi's note, which was still lying just inside the doorway where it had landed when he had slipped it under the door. Certain that the piece of paper had not been there when she and her mother had come in to sleep,

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Towela immediately thought of the notes she had heard people who commit suicide leave behind to give reasons for taking their own lives. So, after strapping baby Nengezi onto her back, she found Nyalupeska's *koloboyi*, picked up the piece of paper and went into her mother's kitchen hut. There, after fishing a couple of live charcoals from the ashes and blowing them into a flame with which she lit the *koloboyi*, she settled down to reading Tomasi's note.

Rejoining Nyalupeska and Jalani after reading the note, a tearful Towela couldn't help speaking well above a whisper as she reported to the others:

"Tomasi wrote me a note in which he explains why he decided to do this thing. He blames you two. He says you have put in his blood a *ranki* which he is convinced works. He says it is this *ranki* which moved the *bazungu* to pay his school fees. He also says the teacher whose parents paid his school fees is calling him to *Mangalande* to continue his education there. Again Tomasi is convinced it is the *ranki* which you have put in his blood that has moved his former teacher to call him to *Mangalande*. He says these things have convinced him that the *ranki* has now taken over his life; and he decided to do this because he did not want to live a life run by a *ranki*. That is what he says in this note, which he slipped under your door, mother. I found the note just now when I went to get Nengezi."

"What is Tomasi talking about, Manda?" a puzzled Nyalupeska asked Jalani. "A *ranki*? What we have put in his blood is protective medicine."

"You forget them, mother," Jalani said, his voice forlorn and full of regret, "that you and I lied to Tomasi when giving him the protective medicine. We decided to tell him it was a *ranki*, fearing that he would reject it if we told him it was protective –"

Jalani broke off when he noticed that Tomasi had suddenly begun to stir. Then he, Nyalupeska and Towela abruptly dropped to their knees beside Tomasi, severally enquiring how he was feeling.

"You are alright now, aren't you?" Jalani asked urgently as Tomasi weakly stretched up his hand, requesting him to help him sit up.

"I think I'm alright," Tomasi said in a weak, strangled whisper after Jalani and Nyalupeska had gently helped him to sit up.

While being held steady by Nyalupeska and Jalani, who were now squatting around him in the mud as Towela stood by, Tomasi startled the other three by producing a weak but quite audible chuckle.

"Brother," he said after the chuckle, which somehow seemed to have suddenly doubled his strength. "Did I hear you say that you lied to me about the luck charm? Did you say that what was put in my blood is not a *ranki*?"

"It is not a *ranki*," Jalani said ever so gently, as if he was talking to someone whose feelings were extremely fragile. "What you allowed mother to put in your blood that night was the same protective medicine you rejected when the rest of us in the family had it following father's death. It was not a *ranki*."

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“So you thought it was a *ranki*, my son?” said Nyalupeska, now kneeling beside Tomasi, her voice sounding as if she feared Tomasi did not believe what they were telling him. “You do not have any *ranki* in your blood, my son. It was all a lie. What has been happening to you is all from the Lord our God. You do not have a *ranki* in your –”

“Mother,” Tomasi was saying, “I’m very sorry that I tried to take my life, but I’m sure you have understood why. Brother, thank you for saving my life tonight. And sister, you came at a most crucial time....”

These moving words from her younger brother brought Towela to her knees and, throwing her arms around Tomasi as she wept for sheer joy, she muttered, “Oh I am so happy, brother, and so thankful to God.”

“But mother,” Tomasi continued, “I am still the same Tomasi, who believes neither in luck charms nor in protective medicines.”

“I am happy to hear that, my son,” Nyalupeska found herself saying.

“Brother,” Tomasi went on, “You once said that I should not disappoint the family, that the family expected me to reach university, to go to *Mangalande*. Well, I’m pleased to say that although I did not pass the examinations well enough to be selected for the university, I will soon be going to *Mangalande*.”

Jalani and Nyalupeska vaguely remembered that Towela had said something about Tomasi having written in his would-be suicide note that he had been invited to England

by his former teacher. They now got so excited about the news that both of them would have danced for joy had the sound of Tomasi's voice not brought back to their minds his present condition.

"I think I'm alright now," Tomasi was saying. "Brother, help me walk to my hut."

As Nyalupeska and Towela followed the two brothers inching along in the pre-dawn darkness, Nyalupeska was so happy with the way things had turned out that she felt like waking up the sleeping village with ululations of joy.

GLOSSARY

This glossary mainly lists those vernacular words and expressions that have not been immediately or directly glossed in the narrative.

a-mdala – honorific form of *mdala*: old man

bazungu – plural of *mzungu*: white person.

chitenje – ladies' wrap-around cloth.

chiyunisonganya – one who gossips with the sole aim of causing discord among people.

dimba – a dry-season vegetable garden, usually located on the banks of a river.

koloboyi – a small, home-made oil lamp.

madimba – plural of *dimba*.

madoda – the men folk of a village.

malowolo – lobola; cattle paid for the bride.

Mangalande – England.

mpbala – the place where the men folk of a village congregate for fellowship and meals.

mpbamba – a potion to be ritually taken by those involved in a terribly binding oath in order to undo its dire potential effects on them.

mzimu – the shade or spirit of a dead person.

nganya – pal.

nkhwangu – last-born.

nyanga – an instrument of witchery.

odi! – a call made to announce one's arrival at someone's place or home.

odini! – the response to acknowledge *odi!*

ranki – a luck charm.

sima – a thick maize porridge; Malawi's staple. It is spelt *sima* in Northern Malawi, but *nsima* in the rest of the country.

simbo – an incision through which herbal medicine, in paste or powder form, is rubbed into the blood stream. The word is also used for the scar left by such an incision.

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uti ukawone – a dreaded remark meant to be taken as a threat that the speaker will bewitch the person to whom it is addressed.

mwira – a double-headed snake believed to be a death-breathing pet of wizards.

The Luck Charm

Tomasi Manda, an intelligent boy whose rational mind rejects belief in witchcraft, does something that causes his mother and elder brother to fear that he might be bewitched.

They decide to put "protective medicine" into his blood. But their problem is how to get Tomasi to accept the medicine, having once before failed to convince him to have such protection. However, when Tomasi passes his primary school examinations and is selected for a boarding secondary school away from home, the two approach him with the medicine disguised as a charm, something that would bring him good luck from the strangers among whom he will now be living. Tomasi initially rejects the offer, but when, to his surprise, he sees that this causes his mother great pain, he lets her insert in his blood "the totally useless powder."

Then certain things begin to happen to Tomasi which, unable to explain them otherwise, he can't help thinking are being caused by the stuff his mother has put in his blood. Eventually he becomes convinced that he now has a potent luck charm in his body, and reaches the frightening conclusion that from now on his life will be run by this charm. What is he to do?



About the Author

Tito Banda was born and brought up in Tihauke Village, Mzimba District. He received his secondary education at Mzimba and Nkhata-Bay Secondary Schools and his college education at Messiah College and Temple University in the USA and finally at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. Until the time of his death in 2014, he was a lecturer in literature and creative

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